

# Exposition

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## What is Exposition?

In any story, a character or group of characters moves through certain events. One thing happens, then another thing, then another, and then the story is over. If it's a really simple story, like a fairy tale, we might not know very much more than those events. But if we want the story to have more depth, we need information so that we understand who this character is, what their life is like, and why this story matters; basically, things that happened before the story ever started. Good writers weave that stuff into their stories through **exposition**, giving little bits of information while they tell the story.

Exposition includes:

- **character details:** Who is this character? How old are they? Do they have a job? Do they go to school? What kind of skills, hobbies, and habits do they have?
- **setting:** Where and when is this story taking place?
- **background information:** What led up to the situation the character is in right now? For example, if our story is about a family going out to dinner for the first time in over a year due to a global pandemic, it might be important to let the reader know they haven't been out for a while, and why.

## 2 Rules of Exposition

**1. Only give information that's necessary to the story.** If your character's height does not affect the story, don't tell us how tall he is. If it really doesn't matter what town the story takes place in, leave that information out.

**2. Keep the story moving.** If you spend too much time in exposition, but nothing actually happens in the story, your readers will get bored.

## 4 Ways to Add Exposition to a Story

### 1. Expository Paragraphs

Expository paragraphs are whole paragraphs that just give us background information about the characters or their situation. These tend to show up earlier in the story, as we're just getting to know the characters and situation. Here's an example of an expository paragraph from a story about a thirteen-year-old character who wants her parents to trust her at home alone.

I have always wanted my parents to let me stay home alone, but they almost never do. I'm *thirteen*. It's ridiculous. They'll go to the store for 30 minutes or maybe let me stay home while they have a dentist appointment or something, but otherwise, if they're going to be gone more than an hour, they have a babysitter come over.

### 2. Between Lines of Narration or Dialogue

Writers often squeeze a little bit of exposition in between other things, like lines of narration or dialogue. Below is an example of putting exposition in the middle of some narration. This sentence is about the narrator dancing, but it's interrupted to give us a bit of information about her parents' usual rules (the exposition is in italics):

I turned it up loud—*they were always telling me to turn it down*—and danced around the kitchen.

In this other example, one sentence of exposition is placed between two lines of dialogue.

"Wait for me," he called. *Since his injury, Mattias had trouble keeping up with me.* "I have some news!"

### 3. Inside Dialogue

Another way to add exposition is to have the character say something that provides information, like in this example:

"...Do you think I'm going to open the door to some serial killer or burn the house down or something? *I get good grades in school and I've never gotten in trouble*, but apparently I can't be trusted..."

When you use this technique, it's important to make the dialogue sound natural. The example below is what NOT to do, because people don't talk like this:

"Why do you always ask Chloe, *a college student*, to babysit me?"

### 4. Inside Interior Monologue

Finally, you can add exposition inside interior monologue—the character's thoughts inside her head. In the example below, the narrator is reacting to her father's suggestion that they watch the show "Arthur," and in her thoughts, she thinks about the fact that she hasn't watched the show in six years. She doesn't say it aloud, but she thinks it:

Ugh. "Arthur"? *The last time I watched that show was six years ago!*