



FICTIONAL TECHNIQUES THAT ENLIVEN NonFICTION

bringing life to a pile of words

Scenes

Major *Used in books, and have a beginning, middle, end*

Minor *Undeveloped and used in articles.*

Why Use Scenes in Nonfiction?

1. *can introduce pertinent information—without explanation*

Miss Gulch is on her way. Toto is doomed. And denial of dragons will only get us so far before the music comes on, ominous and galloping.

"Ooh, I hate this part!" squeals Blake, nine years old, as we watch the dragon lady ride her bicycle grimly down the dusty Kansas road, mouth prim. We see Uncle Henry let her in at the front gate, letting it snap shut against her bottom.

"I'm taking that dog," Miss Gulch minces tartly, "to the sheriff and make sure he's destroyed!"

"Destroyed? Toto?" breathes out Dorothy, frantically clutching her little dog in her arms. "Oh, you can't, you mustn't! Uncle Henry, you won't let her, will you? Please, Auntie Em, Toto didn't mean to, he didn't know he was doing anything wrong. I'm the one who ought to be punished! I'm the one who let him go in her garden! You can send me to bed without supper!"

Loss of innocence, moving out of childhood at the nudge of evil, is a painful process. Dorothy, racing home with Toto in her arms, was overwhelmed by the infringement of her safety. In her panic and unable to deny the dragon facing her—Miss Gulch—Dorothy latched onto the first line of defense, the same one we all reach for—blame. In her case, self-blame. Blame works two ways, like a double-edged sword: we can project it onto someone else or we can internalize it. [*Taming The Dragons*, Brenda Wilbee]

By setting the scene, I only had to use one narrative paragraph to make my point on “projecting blame” in order to feel safe. I don’t need to go into all the definitions, explanations, etc. Projection and safety is illustrated in this scene.

2. *can expose, highlight, or dramatize tension and/or opposition*
We thought we had only Miss Gulch to contend with, but now there's a dead witch under the house, and another witch is wanting to know who killed her, and there's a good witch too! A good witch? And the wicked witch says we killed her sister. But we didn't mean to kill anyone! "I'll get you, my pretty," the wicked Witch of the West screams in our face, "and your little dog too!" If Toto was in danger before, he really is now—and so are we. Crisis wakes us up and shatters our innocence and leaves us disillusioned, abandoned, and often painfully confused and in need of help. Death. Divorce. Unemployment. Failing health. Wayward children. The brutal slaying of a seven-year-old in the park just last week. No, this is not what we want, and we see the dragons clearly enough now. But where is the hero? "Oh, I'd give anything to be out of Oz," says Dorothy. "But how?" How do we get out of this mess? Oh, why, we all wail, is this happening to me? [*Taming The Dragons*, Brenda Wilbee]

This “scene” is partial, but we all know the story. The tension of living in a fallen world where terrible things happen—and keep on happening—is highlighted and is more interesting and effective than a narrative treatise.

3. *brings immediacy by allowing readers to “see” and “hear”*
In Walt Disney's movie version of Pinocchio when the little "wooden head" looked into the mirror, he certainly discovered for himself what a "jackass" he could be, and I, looking in a similar mirror of introspection, didn't like much of what I saw either. [*Taming The Dragons*, Brenda Wilbee]
4. *In articles, serves as “cameo” elements to frame or launch ideas more effectively and efficiently because we prefer story to narrative—story carries detail people already know so we don’t have to spend a lot of time in boring narrative.*
Los Angeles, August 2000. President Clinton, having completed his rip-roarin’ speech to the Democratic convention, gives way to the Broadway cast of ‘The Music Man,’ which marches through the aisles playing ‘76 Trombones.’ The convention planners claim the scheduling is a coincidence. Maybe. But it marks the perfect send-off for America’s own Professor Harold Hill. [*Newsweek*, “So Long, Music Man,” Jan 22, 2001. Jonatan Alter]

By creating a minor scene in way of introduction, Alter is able to launch into his article, using “The Music Man” as his controlling metaphor. He sucked us in by creating a visual scene—a visualization we keep throughout Alter’s *abstract assessment of Clinton’s complexity*.

- Dialog:** *Breaks up narrative*
 Growing up, I often heard the story of my mother's lost Shirley Temple doll. Given to her during the Depression, and much treasured, her granny nevertheless refused to let her play with it lest she break it. I was in high school when I decided to find my mother another Shirley Temple doll, and every antique shop I went into over the years I searched, invariably found nothing, and left with my name on yet another list. Then one summer day just a few years ago I got a call.
- “Don’t sell it!” I all but shouted into the phone, yanking off my gardening gloves and kicking off my boots. “I’ll be right up!”**
- The doll was in beautiful condition. [*Daily Guideposts*, Brenda Wilbee]
- Quotes:** *Bringing in the experts to support your point*
Newsweek reports, “Scarcely prepared by college guidance officers, the [Baby Boom Generation] often succumbs to family pressure or casual advice from friends and stumble into first jobs that ill suit their talents or interests.” [“Why Are So Many People Changing Careers? Part II”, *Solo Magazine*, Brenda Wilbee]
- Anecdotes:** *small story, usually with a punch line; used to introduce or conclude a point*
 A girlfriend once sent me a cartoon. The first little guy said, “Life is unfair.” The second little guy said, “Yeah, but I wish it was unfair my way for a change!”
- I used this to introduce an article on lucky breaks we often overlook [Happiness Digest, Oct 10-16, 1998, Brenda Wilbee]
- Simile:** *comparing unlike this using “as” or “like”*
 Her mind is like a steel trap; old, rusty, and rarely used.
- Analogy:** *a comparison of two things, often on the basis of shared characteristics.*
 Rap is to music what an Etch-a-sketch is to art.
- Metaphor:** *Speaking of one thing to symbolize and “stand in” as something else.*
 Peter was stunned, but then burst into peals of laughter when he saw me standing at the bottom of the stairs, like an island in a sea of brown, with **waves of beans** lapping at my ankles.
 [Agnes Frank, *The Diary of Agnes Frank*]

Deliberate Cliché: *Can be used to make a point.*
Our parents might have taught us “**You made your bed, now lie in it,**” but we're saying, “What’s wrong with changing the sheets?” [“Why Are So Many People Changing Careers? Part II”, *Solo Magazine*, Brenda Wilbee]

Songs Titles: *Provides universal connection*
Not only are there more jobs muddying the water and giving opportunity for more wrong choices, but the good old ladder—once we find it—is getting log-jammed. There is only so much room at the top, and there are only two ways to get past the logjam—wait until somebody farther up the ladder leaves, **or JUMP!** Who feels like sitting around like a vulture on a perch anyway? [“Why Are So Many People Changing Careers? Part II”, *Solo Magazine*, Brenda Wilbee]

Forced Paragraph: *creates a cliffhanger or emphasizes*
Martinson is *not* Humpty Dumpty. He is all the king’s horses and all the king’s men, putting others back together again, and again, and again—through love and courage and dreams of the human heart.

This is what it’s all about.

Jim Martinson.

Unstoppable.

[“What It’s All About, *Sports ‘N Spokes*, Mar/Apr 1991, Brenda Wilbee]

Examples: *Use little stories to make your point.*
An incident in my twelfth year showed me that sometimes other peoples’ ignorance can work to your own benefit. From the back seat of row two I could see the effects of the warm spring day on the other thirty-nine students in our eighth grade class. Our vice principal, Robbie we called him, was droning through a math problem on the blackboard. Through my own dreamy state I became aware of a growing gas pressure. As I felt the point of blessed relief about to arrive, I turned to Bill Cullen in the last seat, row one, and whispered, “Bill!” As he turned to me, I imitated a revolver by pointing two fingers at him just as the gas blew.

Bill’s face began to redden. And when he saw all the faces turn his direction, he turned to a deep crimson and tried to duck behind the person in front of him. A variety of stifled laughs and giggles gave way to great guffaws and Bill looked more guilty than ever.

I learned there are times when letting people remain ignorant can avoid problems for yourself. [*Stories From My Life*, Roy Wilbee]

Detail:

Not necessarily adverbs and adjectives; you want to be careful of them. But occasional detail gives reader something to hear or see. In the following example, the bold is the detail to break up the narrative.

But she didn't know what to write. For months she fretted. Her husband left after Christmas for Cincinnati for three months. "You'll think of it," he said, but two more months passed and nothing. One Sunday in late February she was in church. **Wind and snow swept the window panes, the preacher's voice droned on and on,** and suddenly—a vision! An old black man, beaten and tortured by two other black men, urged on by a cruel slave master.

[Taming The Dragons, Brenda Wilbee]

Repetition:

repeating a word drives the sentence forward, but it must fall in consistent rhythm and parallel syntax

“Everywhere urgency prevailed. *Hurry! Hurry* before thousands bottlenecked the passes! *Hurry* before the early winter set in—*hurry* before the Yukon River froze, before they were locked out, before the gold was gone! *Hurry!*

[Skagway: It's All About The Gold, Brenda Wilbee]