

# Chronological vs. Narrative Order.

When you are ready to put your scenes into a provisional order and write your second draft, or method draft, you will face the question of whether to do so chronologically or narratively. If you put your events in chronological order, they will happen one after another in time: today, tomorrow, next year. There will be no multiple timelines, and you may make little to no use of flashbacks or flash-forwards.

If you use narrative order, however, you will present events in a different order than they happened. There are some good reasons to do this; for example, you will be able to choose where to go in the story and when, based on a more thematic rationale. There are also some not-so-good reasons to do this, such as the subconscious desire to cover up your insecurities about how good your work is by making things confusing.

To some degree, narrative order is the natural way to tell a story because you are reorganizing what happened to make a particular impact. Say you are out on a date. You just got out of a long-term relationship, and your new love interest asks you about it. If you were to tell the events chronologically, it might look like this:

1. Meeting Unexpectedly
2. Falling in Love
3. This Is My Soulmate
4. Falling Out of Love
5. The Breakup

You are probably, however, going to tell the story using narrative order for its psychological effect. You might start with (4), Falling Out of Love, and mention all the things you couldn't live with. You then would probably go to (5), The Breakup, to assure your new friend that things are really over—although you might first go back to (2), Falling in Love, if you can find the clues as to what was wrong with this previous person to bolster your argument, foreshadowing how the relationship had always been doomed.

So, 4-2-5... that's probably the story you are going to tell. Those are the parts that are of most interest to your present audience. Each decision you make about order is related to what you want to communicate and to whom.

If you use narrative order, you will likely avail yourself of the literary device known as the flashback. A flashback occurs when you leave the present timeline to recount something that happened previously, and then return to the same narrative timeline you were in before. Flashing back can help explain things—in fact, I think that's why we go to therapy! We're sitting there with a problem, and we think back to the past; a previous scene in our lives provides our motivation and we feel better. The past has provided us with some meaning.

The temptation to flash back in your writing is strong; it is a kind of instant gratification that may or may not oversimplify your story by spelling everything out. All you may really need is to present a bit of information in a memory, where a character relates something through interior monologue without breaking the current scene.

Finally, if you do use narrative order, a word on flash-forwarding. Just as flashbacks work because they correspond with our psychology, flash-forwards—jumping forward in narrative order—usually don't work, because the human psyche is not constructed that way. If someone asks about your past, you can discourse on it rather freely, even though you might end up changing the subject. If someone asks about the future, however, all but the most reckless souls will admit they don't know yet.

The decision of whether to use chronological or narrative order, or some hybrid you invent for a particular situation, should be informed by one basic tenet: What you place first—and then in what order—influences everything.