

# Handling Exposition Like a Pro

From *Structuring Your Novel*, Meredith and Fitzgerald, ch. 6

Exposition is the technique of *communicating information*—in fiction, by skillfully relating details about events, characters or situations that have taken place before a story started (backstory) and that the audience must know to understand the present story and believe its characters.

Exposition analyzes, defines, compares and contrasts, illustrates, and classifies such information. Because it stops the flow of the present story, it should be served up only when necessary, in as small as chunks as possible, weaving it into the narrative flow of the text. To that end, exposition is often combined with dialogue, description, narration, summary, and comment. Exposition itself can be presented in fiction via narration, dialogue or action. Writers skilled at this technique insert exposition subtly, so that the reader or viewer doesn't recognize it as exposition.

The way that exposition is given to the reader depends on *character viewpoint*. The only part of the action, narrative, and description that a viewpoint character can give is that which the character can personally observe or deduce. You cannot present material beyond the knowledge of the viewpoint character. This is not a concern for an unrestricted omniscient narrator.

## Avoiding Faulty Exposition: Sound Techniques for Imparting Information

Here is exposition delivered *incorrectly* by a viewpoint character sharing information he could not possibly know:

I stood beside Sam Jones as we watched his house burn down. Sam felt like crying. He thought at first the firemen could save it but knew it was hopeless as the roof caved in.

TECHNIQUE	EXAMPLE
<b>Let a character share the information with the viewpoint character through dialog.</b>	I felt sorry for Sam Jones as we watched his house burn down. “I feel like crying,” Sam said. “At first I thought the firemen could save it, but now the roof’s caving in, and I know it’s hopeless.”
<b>Let the VP character narrate the expository information in a way that indicates that another character has given him the information (indirect dialog).</b>	Sam Jones told me that he felt like crying while he watched his house burn down. He said that at first he thought the firemen could save it, but he knew it was hopeless when the roof caved in.
<b>Deliver information about a character not present in the scene by having the VP character dialogue with another character.</b>	I met Charlie Bates the day after Sam Jones’s house had burned down. “How did Sam take it?” I asked. “Oh,” Charlie said, screwing up his mouth like a purse, “he was pretty jarred. Told me he felt like crying. And when the roof caved in on ’er, he said he knew it was hopeless and the firemen couldn’t save it.”

TECHNIQUE	EXAMPLE
<p><b>When two characters are both aware of information the reader doesn't know, convey this information by bringing it out during an argument.</b></p>	<p>I met Steve Barbich, who was chief of our volunteer fire department, outside the Post Office.</p> <p>"If you and your men had got to the fire sooner you could have saved Sam Jones's house," I said, putting the blame right where I thought it should be.</p> <p>"We got there as soon as we could," Steve said defensively.</p> <p>"But not soon enough," I said. "Poor old Sam told me that he felt like crying watching his house burn down, and he thought the firemen could save it until the roof caved in."</p> <p>"I know," Steve said. "He told me. And if just one more person makes a crack about us getting there late, I'm quitting as chief."</p> <p>"You won't have to quit," I said. "People will demand you resign."</p>
<p><b>Convey information about the past which the reader must know (backstory) through the reminiscences of two or more characters who have such knowledge.</b></p>	<p>I met Bill Jones coming out of a hotel in Capitol City. He was the first person from my hometown I'd seen since moving to the city. I was on my way to have lunch and invited him to join me. We talked about what had happened to each of us during the past months and then began to reminisce about home.</p> <p>"How's your Uncle Sam?" I asked.</p> <p>"He's never been the same since that night the old family home burned down," Bill answered. "Does nothing but complain about that new house."</p> <p>"I'll never forget that night," I said. "Remember how we were standing there beside him and he told us he felt like crying?"</p> <p>Bill nodded. "And how he told us he kept hoping the firemen would save the house until the roof finally caved in."</p>
<p><b>Convey information about the past to the reader through the unspoken thoughts of the narrator.</b></p>	<p>It was a hot night without a breath of wind blowing. The kind of night people said was made to order for a fire. It reminded me of the night Sam Jones's house had burned to the ground. I remembered standing beside Sam as we watched the house burn and him telling me he felt like crying, and how he kept hoping the firemen would save the house—until the roof finally caved in.</p>

## Testing Your Novel for Faulty Exposition

As you read through a draft of your novel, ask yourself the following questions each time exposition is used to impart information to the reader:

1. Is this information absolutely essential so that the reader will understand and believe in the characters and the story? This has to do with character motivation and plot plausibility.
2. How would the viewpoint character know this information? Is it presented effectively using one of the above modes?