

# *WriteGuide.com's* Letter Writing Program

## Lesson Five: *Symbolism*

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A symbol is something that represents something else. When we see a flag with red and white stripes and a blue square filled with stars in the upper left-hand corner, we think of America; when we see a heart we think of love; when we see skull in front of two crossed bones, we think of danger. All those things are symbols. They're signs that give us important information.

When it comes to a piece of writing, symbols can be extremely powerful. Let's take a look at how they work...

**Dear Friend,**

**Today I saw a moose. He lifted his head up out of a pond as I walked by. One minute there was a beautiful, seemingly quiet pond with water lilies and cattails; and then a giant, hulking head burst from the surface, its antlers streaming with weeds and water.**

**I froze. What else could I do? Moose can be quite dangerous, in case you didn't know. They don't care much for humans, and if they're in a foul mood they tend to charge at anything that moves.**

**Its head turned to look at me. Its nostrils were steaming in the cold morning air. Then it gave a mighty snort and shook its head from side to side. I was so close that droplets fell on my arms and face. The moose took a lurching step forward, as if freeing itself from the muck in the bottom of the pond – and then it moved slowly alongside the bank, away from me, until it reached a pebbled shore. As it lumbered out of the water and disappeared behind the trees I gave a sigh of relief.**

**Seeing the moose this morning made me think. But first I had to catch my breath, for although the moose had gone he certainly hadn't left my mind. I sat down next to the pond and picked up a small rock to fiddle with. The moose had been so big – bigger than any animal I'd ever seen. I've been to zoos before, and even to the circus when I was little; but never had I been so close to a wild animal, and never had something's size impressed me so much. Watching the moose climb out of the pond was like watching a monster emerge from a nightmare. "Don't be so silly," I said to myself, sitting there on the bank. "It was just a moose."**

**The quiet of the pond suddenly seemed overwhelming.**

**“Just a moose? The thing could have killed me!” I said aloud. And it was true, of course, for had the moose decided I would look good on his antlers, he could have charged and my life would have ended. It was sheer luck that he had walked away so calmly.**

**Sitting there in the weeds I listened to the birds and watched the sun cast undulating shadows in the water. I began to feel very small. We humans, with our big brains and clever notions, are no match for nature. Sure, we can build houses and knock down trees. We can shoot animals and cure sickness. But if we’re ever alone out in the wilderness, we’re in danger. The moose reminded me of that fact, and now I know he won’t ever let me forget it.**

See how it works? First we saw **a very vivid flashback that focused on the moose**, and then **the writer talked about what the moose *meant* to him**. Whenever a writer **talks about what a physical object *means* to him**, he’s created a symbol, and is therefore using *symbolism*.

There are three basic kinds of symbolism: **direct symbolism, indirect symbolism, and subtle symbolism**. The kind used up above in the letter about the moose is an example of **indirect symbolism**, because the writer didn’t directly say that the moose was a symbol. Had he said, “The moose was a symbol of my humility,” or, “To me the moose meant defenselessness,” he would have been using the moose as a **direct symbol**. Instead of talking about what the moose *meant* to him, the writer chose to talk about what the moose *made him think*. Using indirect symbolism, then, is as simple as **1) describing an object, and then 2) discussing what the object made you think**. As you can tell from the example, **using internal dialogue** helps quite a bit.

**Direct symbolism** isn’t used very often at all in writing, but it can produce some very powerful writing nonetheless. Let’s take a look:

**Dear Friend,**

**A lot of people get upset about the rain. Take my sister, for instance. She can’t stand it. When it rains all she does is complain about all the things she can’t do. She can’t go out to empty the compost, she can’t go out shopping, and she certainly can’t work on her suntan.**

**To me, the rain means something. It means green grass growing, and it means the buds on the trees will soon burst into leaves. It means the cat jumping at raindrops in the window. It means warm tea and a book in my favorite chair. When it rains, life doesn’t stop – it simply changes.**

**Direct symbolism** is always easy to notice. Notice, though, that it's difficult to use without coming across as dramatic, and maybe even a bit smug. To use it, all you have to do is **directly state what a certain object means to you. Usually you'll use the words "means" or "represents" or "symbolizes."**

**Subtle symbolism** is by far the most difficult form of symbolism to use successfully in a piece of writing. As the name implies, **subtle symbolism** is difficult to recognize. When you use **subtle symbolism** you won't be talking about what something means, or what something made you think. Instead, using **subtle symbolism** is a matter of emphasizing certain objects by 1) repeating them throughout the letter, or 2) describing them in a very detailed way.

**Dear Friend,**

**I got home to find a pair of scissors sitting on my desk. For a second I thought my daughter had been cutting and pasting again, but then I remembered that Madeline was all grown up, and was away at college. She used to love cutting and pasting. She'd take sheet after sheet of colored construction paper, and cut out all sorts of random shapes. Then she'd place them on a piece of black paper and play with them until they resembled animals, trees, houses – anything, really – and glue them down.**

**She was always very precise with those scissors. If ever the edge of a piece of paper was frayed or ripped, she'd cut it off and make it straight. Straight as an arrow. That's how Madeline is, really. She likes things to be clean and precise and straight. She always has. If she thinks something is confusing or unclear, she'll take it apart bit by bit until it makes sense to her. It's a lot like using a pair of scissors to trim a piece of paper, actually. The only trouble is that once in a while she'd trim so much there's be nothing left.**

See how it works? Instead of saying that the pair of scissors symbolizes his daughter, the writer **explains how his daughter used the scissors, and that in some ways she was very similar to the scissors**. **Subtle symbolism** is a very advanced writing technique, and if you can pull it off successfully, you certainly have something to be proud of! To use it, you should **1) describe a physical object, 2) explain what the object reminds you of, and then 3) talk about the similarities or differences between the object and the thing of which it reminds you.**

In your next letter you should include the following items:

- 1. At least three examples of *imagery*.**
- 2. At least three examples of *internal dialogue* (direct or indirect – it doesn't matter which).**
- 3. At least one *simile* or a *metaphor*.**

4. **One flashback, or one flashback within a flashback.**
5. **One example of *direct symbolism, indirect symbolism, or subtle symbolism.***

Remember, most of these techniques are designed to overlap, so it's OK to combine some of them.

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