

# *WriteGuide.com's* Letter Writing Program

## Lesson Four: *Flashbacks*

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A **flashback** is a section of writing that describes an event which took place at some point *before* the time in which the rest of the writing took place. So if you're writing about something that happened today, and suddenly you switch the discussion so that it focuses on something that happened last winter, you've written a flashback.

**Flashbacks** are useful because they give us a lot of freedom. We use flashbacks all the time when we talk to people, so it makes sense that we should use them when we write letters as well. **Flashbacks** allow our conversations to move back and forth in time. One minute you might be talking about the weather, and in the next you might be talking about a movie you saw last weekend. Take a look:

**Dear Friend,**

**It's very late at night right now, but I couldn't sleep and so I figured I may as well write to you. I'm sitting at my desk wearing my bathrobe and slippers; it's always cold when you climb out of a warm bed. The light from the small lamp in front of me provides a bit of heat, but I'll be happy to get back to bed in a few minutes.**

**The reason I can't sleep is because something very strange happened today, and I wanted to tell you about it. It started out as a normal day but then around 10:00 there was a knock on the door, and when I opened it there was no one there. Instead there was a small brown package with my name on it. I looked around to see if anybody was there – and there wasn't. So I picked up the package and brought it inside.**

**“What could it be?” I wondered as I set it down on the kitchen table. I picked up a pair of scissors and cut off the string that was tied around it. Then, slowly, I opened the box...**

See how writers can “move” back and forth in time? Notice that the letter began in the **present tense**, which means it **focused on events that were happening as the writer was actually writing** the letter. Then, in the second sentence of the second paragraph, it moved into the **past tense**, which **focused on events that happened earlier** in the day. Everything after the second sentence in the second paragraph is a **flashback**.

In order to write a **flashback**, the most important thing you need to learn how to do is to *begin* the **flashback**.

All **flashbacks** begin with a special type of phrase called a *flashback phrase*. If you look back at the sample letter up above, you'll notice that the second sentence in the second paragraph begins with the phrase **"It started out as a normal day but then around 10:00..."**. That phrase is a flashback phrase. How do we know? Because it changes tense. All the sentences before the **flashback phrase** took place in the **present tense**, but then in the second sentence of the second paragraph **the tense switched** into the **past tense**. Specifically, the change occurs in the word **"started."** Notice that **"started"** has an **"ed"** ending, which tells the reader that it happened in the **past**. Not all words that take place in the **past tense** end with **"ed"**, though, so be careful! The words **"drove"** and **"found"** definitely take place in the **past** – but they don't have **"ed"** endings!

Another way to create a **flashback phrase** is to use something we call a **"time reference."** A **time reference** is a word that tells the reader that the event you're describing in your letter took place in the past. Terms like **"yesterday"** or **"last week"** clearly tell the reader that you're talking about something that's already happened. **Flashback phrases** that makes use of **time references** include words with **"ed"** endings as well. That's because it's impossible to talk about something that happened **"yesterday"** without using the **past tense**.

Below is a short list of sentences containing different **flashback phrases**. Some of them contain **time references** and some of them do not. Notice, though, that all of them contain words with **"ed"** endings.

- **It all started when I received a strange phone call.**
- **The good news arrived just when I needed it.**
- **At 2:30 my sister walked down the street to the library.**
- **Just yesterday I was walking down the street when I remembered something important.**
- **The other day I was tying my shoe when my contact lens fell out of my eye and rolled under the table.**
- **Last week I visited my aunt.**

Everything we've said so far in this lesson is based on the idea that you'll be writing your letter in the present tense. That's not always how it works! Take a look:

**Dear Friend,**

**Hello again. Yesterday the sun was shining and there wasn't a lot of wind, so I decided to go for a walk. I walked down the road, my hand in my pocket, whistling as I went. Then a car drove by, and as it passed I found myself stopping dead in my tracks – the car looked familiar. Where had I seen it before? At first I couldn't remember, so I continued walking. Then it hit me: it was one of the cars I had seen two years ago at a family reunion. My family and I had driven all the way to New York to attend a...**

Do you see how the letter actually began with a flashback? After the sentence “Hello again” the letter immediately moves into a flashback. It makes use of a **time reference** – the word “**yesterday.**” But then, as the writer talks about going for a walk and seeing the car, he has a **flashback within a flashback**. He remembers a family reunion that he attended two years before he took his walk; and he took the walk a day before he wrote the letter.

In such a situation we need a new rule. If the letter had started out in the **present tense** we could simply switch into the **past tense** in order to create the flashback. Now that the letter starts in the **past tense**, remaining in the **past tense** does us no good at all.

The solution is to use something called the **past perfect tense**. The **past perfect tense** allows us to speak or write in the **past tense**, and to then refer to something that happened even earlier. The **past perfect tense** is characterized by the word “had.” For example, if I said, “**I heard you were coming,**” I’d be using the **past tense**. But if I said, “**I had heard you were coming,**” I’d be using the **past perfect tense**.

Looking back at the sample letter up above, you’ll see the sentence “**Where had I seen it before?**” At that point the flashback within the flashback is just beginning. But then the letter says, “**At first I couldn’t remember, so I continued walking,**” and the scene returns to the **past tense**. The next sentence, however, moves us back into the **flashback within the flashback** again, this time for good: “**Then it hit me: it was one of the cars I had seen two years ago at a family reunion. My family and I had driven all the way to New York to attend a...**”. It’s OK to fade back and forth between flashbacks and flashbacks within flashbacks, especially if you’re writing about someone who’s having a hard time remembering something.

Now that we’ve talked about how to **begin** a flashback, we need to talk briefly about how to continue writing one. To continue writing in a flashback, simply **continue using the tense that you used to begin the flashback**.

**Flashbacks within flashbacks are slightly different:** once you’ve started one, you can **continue using the tense that you used to begin it** (the **past perfect tense**), but you can also use the **past tense as well**. The examples below will help explain.

**Ending a flashback** is as simple as **moving back to the tense you used to begin the letter**. Let’s finish up the two sample letters and see how it’s done:

**Dear Friend,**

**It’s very late at night right now, but I couldn’t sleep and so I figured I may as well write to you. I’m sitting at my desk wearing my bathrobe and slippers; it’s always cold when you climb out of a warm bed. The light from the small lamp in front of me provides a bit of heat, but I’ll be happy to get back to bed in a few minutes.**

The reason I can't sleep is because something very strange happened today, and I wanted to tell you about it. It started out as a normal day but then around 10:00 there was a knock on the door, and when I opened it there was no one there. Instead there was a small brown package with my name on it. I looked around to see if anybody was there – there wasn't. So I picked up the package and brought it inside.

"What could it be?" I wondered as I set it down on the kitchen table. I picked up a pair of scissors and cut off the string that was tied around it. Then, slowly, I opened the box. Inside was a large white shape, roughly the size of my head. It was an ostrich egg! I picked it up to get a better look at it and noticed there was a tag on it. It read, "From your Great Uncle Davy."

"Great Uncle Davy? Who's that?" I wondered.

Like I said before, that was yesterday. I've been wondering all day who Great Uncle Davy is. I wish I could figure it out. My mother isn't related to anyone named "Davy" and neither is my father. Tomorrow I'll be going to the post office to see if they can help shed some light on this mystery.

Dear Friend,

Hello again. Yesterday the sun was shining and there wasn't a lot of wind, so I decided to go for a walk. I walked down the road, my hand in my pocket, whistling as I went. Then a car drove by, and as it passed I found myself stopping dead in my tracks – the car looked familiar. Where had I seen it before? At first I couldn't remember, so I continued walking. Then it hit me: it was one of the cars I had seen two years ago at a family reunion. My family and I had driven all the way to New York to attend a family picnic last year. We spent all day in the car driving, and when we arrived we met lots and lots of long-lost relatives. One of them, who turned out to be my Aunt Gretchen, drove a giant red Cadillac. The car stuck in my mind because it had had a pair of pink fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror.

As soon as I figured out that Aunt Gretchen was coming for a visit, I turned around and headed back to the house.

See how it's done? In the second example the writer moved back and forth between the **past tense** and the **past perfect tense** in order to complete the **flashback within the flashback**. The **flashback within the flashback** begins with the sentence "Then it hit me: it was one of the cars I *had seen* two years ago at a family reunion." But then it moves back and forth between the two tenses: "**My family and I *had driven* all the way to New York to attend a family picnic last year. We *spent* all day in the car driving, and when we *arrived* we *met* lots and lots of long-lost relatives. One of them, who *turned* out to be my Aunt Gretchen, *drove* a giant red Cadillac. The car *stuck* in my mind because it *had had* a pair of pink fuzzy dice hanging from the**

**rearview mirror.”** The italicized verbs that include the word “**had**” are in the **past perfect tense**, and those that **do not include the word “had”** are in the **past tense**.

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 two *similes*.**
4. **One *flashback*, or one *flashback within a flashback*.**

Remember, most of these techniques are designed to overlap, so it’s OK to combine some of them. You’ll find lots of opportunities to include **imagery**, **internal dialogue**, and **similes** within **flashbacks** and **flashbacks within flashbacks**.

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