



# **Module 8 : How to Use Backstory Without Being Boring**

- The definition of backstory
- Why backstory is important in children's literature
- What happens when backstory is employed incorrectly
- When to use backstory and when to avoid it

**In this chapter, about how to use backstory, we will cover the following topics in more detail:**

- The definition of backstory
- Why backstory is important in children's literature
- What happens when backstory is employed incorrectly
- When to use backstory and when to avoid it
- Some ways to incorporate backstory effectively
- How your use of backstory will differ depending on the age of your readers

## **8.1 What is Backstory?**



**Backstory is a word that describes the events that occur before the point at which your book starts.**

It is the history of your characters and settings; the who, what, when, where, and how before your narrative begins. Importantly, it is the events that compose the backstory that have brought your characters to the point they are at when the plot begins. Given how crucial these events are to understanding the present situation in the book, you would think that it would be a good idea to fill the reader in on the history of the characters before you start with the proper action, however, doing this is likely to lead to your young readers shutting your book within a minute. Read on to discover how to use backstory effectively, without being boring.

## 8.2 The Importance of Backstory



**Every story has a backstory, so it stands to reason that every book will have one too.**

There are a few cases where the backstory is barely revealed - take Ernest Hemingway's work, for example - but these are few and far between and are of a type of literature that is not really relevant to your goal of writing a children's book.

**Backstory is important for many reasons. Here are some of the more significant ones:**

### **To aid necessary understanding of the plot**

As you will see later, a lot of back story that we think is necessary really is not. However, some backstory is necessary in nearly all books in order for the plot to make sense. Judging what is necessary and what is not can be a tricky business, though. Write your first draft without worrying too much about this.

When finished you can go through and take note of where you have introduced backstory. Are there points where you ramble on for a bit too long? Take these parts out and read again; will the reader still be able to follow the plot? If not, would it be better to spread these facts out so you

keep the narrative flow moving?

### **To make the characters exist outside of the novel**

In order for a book to be successful the reader must get the impression that the characters have the emotional and physical completeness of a real person. Without this, the book will seem two dimensional and unengaging. Although the reader does not need to know where your character was born, the toys she liked to play with at 5 years old, that she fell in the pool and now has a fear of water, that she likes to wear her hair in a plait, that she eats custard creams in a specific way, and that her dad used to call her 'poppykins', some of this might be helpful so the reader can think of her as a real person. The incident in the pool could even be a catalyst for moving the plot along; think creatively about how to create a balance between action and characterisation, and when possible, do them both simultaneously.

### **To strengthen the reader's emotional connection with the characters**

Empathy is key when it comes to sustaining a reader's attention. The way we induce empathy in the reader is to reveal the underlying reasons for their emotional state; in this way a reader can understand a character. Without understanding, there can be no empathy, and without empathy your reader will not find themselves invested in the outcome of the book.

### **To create motive**

Although inherent to the first point in this list, it is important enough to warrant a separate mention. The protagonist must have a motive for moving forward in the plot, and backstory is crucial in providing and explaining this.

## **8.3 What Happens When Backstory is Employed Incorrectly?**



**Used badly, backstory can be a complete nightmare.**

Have you ever read a book which has a good storyline but which every now and then launches into a lengthy passage, sometimes pages long, that recounts in eye-watering detail the circumstances that have led to this point? Chances are, if you are tenacious, you might plough through these. More likely you will skip them and head for the action. In a worst case scenario, you will throw the book down, frustrated that you cannot enjoy the story because of the author's insistence that you understand every small incident in the run-up to the main story.

Children, on the whole, are less tolerant of these long passages and will swiftly get bored.

## 8.4 When to Use Backstory and When to Avoid It



**Correct timing when introducing backstory is vital; begin your book with a long passage of uninteresting exposition about the minutiae of your character's past, and you have lost your reader already.**

Although you may have spent hours outlining their likes and dislikes, their foibles and history, these can serve the purpose of the character becoming real in your mind, so you can transmit them as a believable person; the reader does not need to hear all this.

Similarly, if you have created an amazing fantasy world, complete with belief system, flora and fauna, well done. It will give your book depth and a sense of realism when you write about your universe, however, the reader does not need a categorisation of the root vegetables that grow there and when they can be harvested.

Instead, you should drop certain elements of your backstory into the book as you write, some to give a richer realisation of the setting and characters and some to create tension. Backstory can be a great way of building suspense as the novel progresses; there could be some secret in the protagonist's past that the reader is desperate to find out, or a locked door that they are dying to open. Use an initial 'hook' to draw attention to this subject of curiosity, and draw the reader on throughout the book by dropping morsels of information to keep them interested. In this way, backstory becomes a compelling tool to engage the reader in the action, rather than something that has to be forced into the writing without them noticing.

## 8.5 Ways of Incorporating Backstory

### Flashbacks

Backstory, by its very nature, looks to the past. When you have spent hours crafting a plot that has an exciting pace and forges forward, carrying the reader along with it, the decision to interrupt the narrative thread and move in the opposite direction must not be taken lightly.

Flashbacks are used excessively and incorrectly by many authors who are looking for an easy way to fill the readers in.

That being said, done well, flashbacks lend a realism and sense of authenticity to the backstory. As the reader, we are fully transported to the origin of a character's behaviour, or the catalyst in the chain of events that lead to the beginning of the book, immersing us in the book, past and present. Make sure that the scene you are flashing back to is worthy of an interruption of the narrative flow though, and do not make it too lengthy. This device is seldom used in books for younger children (perhaps under 7 years old) as it can be confusing. If you do use it, ensure that the reader does not become disoriented by the time travel.

You can either refer to a scene briefly in the past, writing a paragraph or two that begins with a cue like 'Last summer, they had ridden their bikes all the way to the river...'; or you can write an entire short chapter, in the simple past tense, or even in the present tense. This second option gives you the advantage of being able to write something under your chapter heading like 'Two Years Earlier', or a specific date if the reader is aware of the current date you are writing in. Make sure you label the following chapter 'Present Time' or something similar so the reader knows you have returned to the main plot.

## **Dialogue**

Dialogue is a useful way of revealing snippets of information here and there, in a way that minimises narrative voice and avoids boring the reader. Care must be taken not to simply transpose great chunks of backstory into dialogue format, as this may ruin your careful construction of your character and will also bore the reader. Make sure that the revelations sound natural and arise from the situation at hand, rather than just being stuck on to the end of something a character says.

You can also include internal monologue, where the reader can hear what the character is thinking without them saying it. You can use this in third person perspective, not just the first person.

## **It might look something like this:**

'If you'd like, you could come over to my house and read the dictionary later,' Davey's teacher said, smiling. 'Sure, uh, maybe,' Davey replied. When hell freezes over.

Be aware that if you are writing in the first person, you can only disclose the thoughts of the person whose perspective you are writing from.

## **Narrative voice**

You can give a certain amount of information through the narrative voice in your book and the suitability of this will depend on the point of view you employ. If you are using the third person omniscient perspective, for example, your narrative voice will have access to any and all information that you wish to disclose; be careful with this though, as even omniscient narration should leave some things unsaid for tension to develop. However, if you are using a more limited viewpoint, like the first person, the amount of backstory that the narrator will have access to will be limited to the past of the person who is speaking, or something that they know about. If you have a crucial piece of information that the reader needs to know, but would take a lot or arduous manipulation to convey through dialogue or action, it is sometimes more effective and less distracting to simply use the narrator's voice to concisely impart it.

## Action and reaction

A lot of backstory can be revealed without being stated explicitly. The characters likes and dislikes, as well as their traits, are part of their backstory, and you can disclose these simply through their actions, and the way that they react to things and people around them.

## 8.6 How to Vary Your Use of Backstory for Different Readerships



**Although the amount of backstory you reveal in a 70,000 word book for young adults will be significantly less than in a 7,000 first chapter book, the first chapter book should still have a solid backstory.**

Those writing for older children must be more subtle in their introduction of backstory, where authors of shorter works must convey the history of the novel in a more condensed format; each has its own challenges.

Even short picture books of 600 words must have a backstory, which informs the way the characters behave and ignites the plot, although you may never refer to it directly.

## 8.7 Backstory Exercises

**Estimated Time: 1 hour+**

**If you are having trouble giving your characters and settings a backstory, try these exercises:**

1. Take each character in your book. Look at your character studies. Are you missing something? Make sure you have covered these elements of their past:  
What is their race?
  - Are they wealthy?
  - How many siblings do they have?
  - Do they have any special talents?

- Are they religious? Why?
  - Do their parents get on well or argue a lot?
  - Level of education
  - I.Q.
  - E.Q. (Like I.Q. but for emotional intelligence)
  - Are they healthy? Have any illnesses or disabilities?
  - What romantic experience have they had?
  - Appearance
  - Do they have any annoying or endearing habits?
  - Do they have any fears or phobias? What caused these to come about?
  - Do they have any political views?
  - What do they dislike in other people?
  - What do they admire in other people?
  - What might they get upset about?
  - What might they get excited about?
2. Try writing the backstory for an object in the room you are sitting in now. What has it seen, smelt, heard, felt, or even tasted? What would it say if it could speak?
3. Write a backstory for a setting that you love.
4. Take each character in your book and write a chronological list of the main events in their past. Highlight the ones that you have/are planning to include in your book, and note beside each of these the reason why you want to include this element of their past. Is each inclusion justified? Why?

## **In Summary**

Backstory is a word to describe the events that occur before the book starts and that lead to the reason your characters are in the situation described in the opening scene.

It is also the history of the characters and settings you include. It is important as it creates a depth and realism to the book, drawing the readers in, as well as providing a logical cause for the action. There are many ways you can incorporate backstory, including narrative voice, flashbacks and dialogue. You must be careful how much you include and cater to your readers' ages in order to keep the book interesting.

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