# 17

# Crafting Narrative

*Something I remember about writing a multigenre paper is the importance of the little stories and the way they mesh and meld to say something bigger.*

Holly Jeric, college junior

Story carries the multigenre load. Not-exposition. Not even poetry. That work is done by story, tale telling. Multigenre wants more than understanding, more than consideration of an argument, more than a calculation of loss. Multigenre wants readers to see, to participate, to experience. Through story, we visualize characters and their actions, are aroused by twists of plot, feel life played out through the sensory language of narrative.

But all storytelling is not created equal. You know effective storytellers. I certainly do. Garrison Keillor on Minnesota Public Radio's "Prairie Home Companion" tells engaging stories about his fictional town, Lake Wobegon. The great children's literacy scholar, Donald Graves, was another great storyteller. Thomas Newkirk writes movingly of Don's ability to weave tales. At large conferences

> a packed audience would respond enthusiastically to his humor, his stories of children in his study, his description of their writing, and his ability to mimic conversations with these children. At times, these stories had the weight of parables. (Newkirk 2009, 125)

And we all knew great storytellers from our youth. For me that great storyteller was my uncle, Gigi Chiavari, who came to America in 1913 when he was eighteen years old. Uncle Gigi was hard to understand until you caught up with the rhythms of his thick Italian accent. But could he ever tell stories . . . he told them with his entire body. His facial expressions revealed the emotion of his words. He punctuated meaning with hand and arm gestures. He sometimes engaged kinesthetic intelligence by acting out what he described. It was not uncommon to see Uncle Gigi on hands and knees or dancing about the room



From: Fearless Writing - Tom Romano • Heinemann, 2013.

or riding an imaginary horse or looking fearfully over his shoulder—whatever the story required. His sense of humor was quick, and his eye for detail sharp. This Italian immigrant with little formal education in the old country, knew intuitively how to end a story with a payoff.[1]

We all know bad storytellers, too. People who provide too little detail, no proper context, and deliver the payoff in the beginning instead of the end. And we know the opposite: People who have us rolling our eyes and searching for ways to break into their monologs, although we can rarely find an opening to wedge into the unrelenting stream of unfiltered words full of tangents, didactic points, and condescending questions that raise our blood pressure.

Such people don't know how to craft a story. How to create characters with dialog and description. How to make a setting come alive with just the right details. How to reveal conflict, build tension, and lead listeners to a release, a payoff, a pleasurable denouement that is clear and satisfying. They don't know how to understate, how to trust readers to make meaning through the information being delivered. They don't know how to be subtle yet emphatically implicit.

Here's an example of a well-written story that came in an email message from a friend. The storyteller crafts language so readers see characters and hear them speak. She lets action reveal plot. She lets us be surprised the way she was. Lastly, she is emphatically implicit with a final, telling detail:

> I was at the bank getting a money order for the cash that was donated to the DNC Saturday night. The teller counted the money three times and then started to run the money order.
>
> "Do you want to just write in the name on the 'to' line?" she asked.
>
> "I'd rather have the name typed on the money order."
>
> She got the form in the printer and asked who it should be made out to.
>
> "The Democratic National Committee," I told her.
>
> She typed D-E-M, then looked at me with one of those "I need help" kinds of looks. I finished spelling the word for her.

[1] For getting effective aspects of oral expression into writing see Chapter 42 of *Crafting Authentic Voice* (Romano 2004).

"Oh, yeah, that's right," she said.

She typed out "National" just fine, then asked, "Does committee have one 'm' or two?"

"Two," I told her.

She finished typing the money order, pulled it out of the printer, and handed it to me with the proud smile of a tough job finally accomplished. As I walked away from the teller window, I glanced down at the money order made out to the "Democratic National Commity."

*Phyllis Mendenhall, Chief Advisor*
*Department of Teacher Education*
*Miami University*

The nature of multigenre is many. One genre cannot oppressively dominate or the paper loses balance and variety. A narrative or exposition of a thousand words knocks the entire paper out of whack, disrupts the flow, the rhythm, the feeling of accomplishment in moving from one genre to the next as we accumulate information and build meaning. Shorter stories are more effective than longer ones. The concept of flash fiction is particularly valuable to the multigenre writer.

Miniature tales, revealing anecdotes, very short stories—narratives that happen in a *flash*—have been popular for years. The authors of *Flash Fiction* (Thomas, Thomas, and Hazuka 1992) hold that *flashes*, as they are often called, run between 250 and 750 words, long enough to indicate character, build plot, and deliver a denouement that might be surprising or troubling or sweetly ambiguous. The authors are quick to point out that the success of flashes does not depend upon length, but upon their "depth, their clarity of vision, their human significance—the extent to which the reader is able to recognize in them the real stuff of real life" (Thomas, Thomas, and Hazuka 1992, 12).

In an explanation of flash fiction, Robert Olen Butler notes that

> a human being (or a "character") cannot exist for even a few seconds of time on planet Earth without desiring something. Yearning for something, a word I prefer because it suggests the deepest level of desire, where literature strives to go. Fiction is the art form of human yearning, no matter how long or short that work of fiction is. (Butler 2009, 102)