

IMMEDIACY VERSUS DISTANCE

By Mike Klaassen

Immediacy refers to time while *distance* addresses relative proximity. Let's take a closer look at these subjects.

IMMEDIACY

*Narrative immediacy*ⁱ is the quality of writing where events in a story seem to unfold as they are being told, helping the reader maintain the illusion that he's *experiencing* the events of the story rather than reading or hearing them after the fact. Immediacy ranges from immediate to delayed.

Here's an example of a potentially exciting event told with delayed narration in *The Frog Prince* by the Brothers Grimm:

And he told her how a wicked witch had bound him by her spells . . .ⁱⁱ

The above is an extreme example of delayed action using summarized conversation: the event is related long after the action occurred. Let's expand this event by adding details and action.

Sparks had flown from the end of the stick when its hot tip had begun to sear his flesh. He had gagged at the putrid smoke that had billowed around him. Waves of nausea had coursed through him as his mind had seemed to swirl. He had screamed as pain had radiated from every part of his body. Through it all, he had sensed that he had been falling, while at the same time the old woman had seemed to grow in height. Blackness had engulfed him.

I hope you agree that this version of the same event provides a greater sense that you are reading about what happened with less delay than in the Brothers Grimm version. But this paragraph is also an example of using the past-perfect verb tense, where the use of the verb *had* creates a delay in the action. Let's look at the same example expressed without the word *had*:

Sparks flew from the end of the stick as its hot tip seared his flesh. He gagged at the putrid smoke that billowed around him. Waves of nausea coursed through him as his mind seemed to swirl. He screamed as pain radiated from every part of his body. Through it all, he sensed that he was falling, while at the same time the old woman seemed to grow in height. Blackness engulfed him.ⁱⁱⁱ

Here, the paragraph is told in the simple past tense. By definition, the action occurred in the past, but the action seems to be happening right now.

DISTANCE

Where *immediacy* refers to time, *distance*^v refers to physical proximity. *Narrative distance*, also referred to as *intimacy* or *penetration*, is the sense of proximity between the narrator and the subject matter of the story, including characters, events, and setting. Narrative distance ranges from distant to close to intimate.

Consider the first paragraph of *Hansel and Gretel* by the Brothers Grimm:

Near a great forest there lived a poor woodcutter and his wife, and his two children; the boy's name was Hansel and the girl's Gretel. They had very little to bite or to sup, and once, when there was great dearth in the land, the man could not even gain the daily bread. As he lay in bed one night thinking of this, and turning and tossing, he sighed heavily, and said to his wife, "What will become of us? We cannot even feed our children; there is nothing left for ourselves?"^v

Here, the narrator begins the story by describing the setting, the characters, and their situation from afar. Then the narrator zooms in closer to the woodcutter's bed, entering his mind to reveal his thoughts.

Let's look at the same passage told with intimacy:

Ten-year-old Hansel woke with hunger gnawing at his insides. He yearned for a meal of meat, vegetables, and bread. Just the thought of food reminded him of how such fare might smell. He savored it and longed for it. Then he grimaced when he realized the aroma he imagined was actually the smell of the old straw stuffed inside the lumpy mattress beneath him."^{vi}

In this example, the narrator tells the story as if he is right there, inside the character's body and mind.

The two examples above illustrate the full range of narrative distance, from distant—to close—to intimate.

Writing with immediacy and intimacy are two keys to maximizing reader involvement and enjoyment of fiction.

LEARN MORE

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ⁱ Lubbock, Percy. *The Craft of Fiction*. 1921, 133. ISBN: 9781482093957.

ⁱⁱ Brothers Grimm, *The Frog King or Iron Henry*, www.grimmstories.com, May 13, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Klaassen, Mike. *The Frog Prince: The Brothers Grimm Story Told as a Novella*. Pennsauken, NJ: Bookbaby, 2016, 7-8. ISBN: 9781483586359.

^{iv} Lubbock, 76.

^v Brothers Grimm, *Hansel and Gretel*, www.grimmstories.com, May 13, 2017.

^{vi} Klaassen, Mike. *Hansel and Gretel: The Brothers Grimm Story Told as a Novella*. Pennsauken, NJ: Bookbaby, 2016, 1. ISBN: 9781483570419.