

## THE MAKING OF FICTION-WRITING MODES by Mike Klaassen

One day I had what was, for me, a breakthrough in understanding how fiction writing works. I suspect we all have “ah-hah!” moments in our lives when something is revealed to us and sheds new light on how we look at things. An “ah-hah” moment for me was many years ago when I was reading *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, by Evan Marshall.<sup>i</sup>

One of the keys to successful fiction, according to Marshall, is to know what you’re doing and why at all times. He noticed that many beginning novelists don’t seem completely conscious of what they are writing. As a result, they misuse what he describes as *fiction-writing modes*—the types of writing of which all fiction is made.

Marshall listed five fiction-writing modes: action, summary, dialogue, feelings/thoughts, and background, each with its own set of conventions regarding how, when, and where it should be used. Over the years since I first read Marshall’s explanation of fiction-writing modes, I’ve incorporated them into my writing and my thinking.

Another “ah-hah!” moment for me occurred in reading Jessica Page Morrell’s *Between the Lines: Mastering the Subtle Elements of Fiction Writing*.<sup>ii</sup> She lists six *delivery modes*: action, exposition, description, dialogue, summary, and transition.

To the credit of both Marshall and Morrell, they have each recognized the need to identify and describe the various modes novelists utilize in the process of creating fiction. But their disparate lists raise several questions:

1. Which is the most appropriate label for the concept: *writing modes*, *fiction-writing modes*, *delivery modes*, or something else?
2. Are all of the terms appropriate for inclusion in a list of modes?
3. Have all of the appropriate candidates for modes been included in the list?

Let’s take the question of a label first. The term *delivery modes* has some merit, but in my mind it creates an image of big vans driven by guys in brown shorts. So, let’s try another one. When I did a Google search using the key words *writing modes*, I was reminded that the term is already being used to describe four broad types of writing: *descriptive*, *expository*, *narrative*, and *persuasive*. I vaguely recall these terms from my school days, so in deference to English teachers and their students, maybe we ought to leave *writing modes* to the classroom.

When I looked at the Googled writing modes a little closer, I saw that narrative writing refers to storytelling. Ah-ha! Maybe we should label the modes as *narrative modes* or narrative-writing modes. Both have appeal, but the word *narrative* bothers me somewhat because it is one of many English words that

mean different things to different people, especially writers. Maybe Evan Marshall has the right label, after all, with *fiction-writing modes*. Fiction writing is consistent with the concept of narrative writing but has little room for misunderstanding. *Novel-writing modes* might work, but that seems to exclude short stories, and the modes certainly transcend both forms of fiction. Until someone comes up with a better label, I'll use *fiction-writing modes*.

Now, let's look at the second and third questions. Are all of the modes listed by Marshall and Morrell appropriate to include on the list? Could there be even more? To answer that question, I combined both of their lists and then brainstormed for others. That resulted in the following list of *mode candidates*: action, summary, dialogue, feelings/thoughts, background, exposition, description, transition, recollection, flashbacks, narrative, introspection, sensation, emotion, scene, sequel, stimulus, and response.

I eliminated *scene & sequel* and *stimulus & response*, since I consider them to be structural components of plot:

- Macro-structure: beginning, middle, and end
- Midlevel-structure: scene and sequel
- Micro-structure: stimulus and response

I deleted *flashbacks* from the mode list because I consider a flashback to be a scene within a sequel or, less appropriately, within another scene.

Background didn't make my list either, since it's essentially the backstory of a plot, and I view plot as having three temporal dimensions:

- Backstory: what happened before the beginning words of the written story
- Current story: what happens in the "now" of the story
- Future story: that part of the story that might come after "The End"

Backstory, current story, and future story can each be revealed in numerous ways: dialogue, exposition, narration, recollection, and flashbacks. That said, I've eliminated background from my personal list of fiction-writing modes.

Marshall's concept of *thinking/feeling* as a mode makes sense, but the term seems cumbersome. In its place I inserted *introspection, recollection, emotion, and sensation*.

Again, the term *narration* troubled me. Not only is it one of the four general writing modes, in a broad sense it also seems to encompass everything a fiction-writer produces. On the other hand, in a more narrow sense, narration is a specific type of writing where the narrator obtrusively communicates to the reader. With this more narrow application in mind, I've included narration as a fiction-writing mode.

Likewise, the term *description* in its broadest sense could be taken to include all fiction. What is dialogue but a description of conversation? Or action but a description of what is currently happening? But some writing is clearly focused on describing something specific and isn't easily categorized in another mode.

I also noticed that all the remaining items on my list of writing-mode candidates ended, or could end, with the suffix *-tion*, with the exception of dialogue. But the term dialogue could be taken to exclude monologue, so I changed it to *conversation*.

After combining the Marshall and Morrell lists, brainstorming for more candidates, winnowing the list, and then converting them to words ending in *-tion*, I arrived at the following list of fiction-writing modes: description, action, narration, conversation, exposition, summarization, introspection, sensation, transition, emotion, and recollection.

### **Fiction-Writing Modes**

(Arranged in order of the anagram D-A-N-C-E S-I-S-T-E-R):

- **Description** is the mode by which people, places, things, or concepts are described.
- **Action** is the mode of describing things happening, in detail, as they happen.
- **Narration** is the mode by which the narrator addresses the reader.
- **Conversation** is the mode of presenting characters talking.
- **Exposition** is the mode of conveying information.
- **Summarization** is the mode of restating or recapitulating actions or events.
- **Introspection** is the mode of conveying a character's thinking.
- **Sensation** is the mode of presenting the five senses, or maybe even six.
- **Transition** is the mode of moving from one place, time, or character to another.
- **Emotion** is the mode of conveying how a character feels.
- **Recollection** is the mode of describing a character recalling something.

Starting with the work of Evan Marshall and Jessica Page Morrell, brainstorming for more, and then winnowing the list, results in eleven fiction-writing modes.

#### **LEARN MORE**

Mike Klaassen is the author of *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the book at Amazon.com.

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<sup>i</sup> Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*. Paperback edition, Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1998, 142. ISBN: 9781582970622

<sup>ii</sup> Morrell, Jessica Page. *Between the Lines: Master the subtle elements of fiction writing*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2006, 127. ISBN: 9781582973937