

## Dissecting Butterflies: An Analysis of Realistic Fictional Narrative Writing

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This article focuses on instructions to writing realistic fictional narrative using examples from Christian's own work as well as examples from the book *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov. Although some consider narrative an easy genre to write, Christian argues that it is one of the hardest and requires a plethora of important things. He goes into detail about the various requirements of this genre using what he calls *aspects* as well as a hierarchal diagram showcasing how story, plot, events, significant details, characters, and insignificant/filler details relate to one another.

Writing serves a variety of purposes for humans today. Whether it's to share information, prove a point, or pass on knowledge, writing is one of the most important tools we have. That being said, each style of writing has its own rules and expectations that need to be followed. Narrative is different. Narrative is one of the only writing genres with which we can do basically anything we want, for the simple pleasure of doing it! We are literally free to create. The only issue with the freedom is that too much freedom can lead to a bad story, and a bad story is obviously not something we want. With that in mind, I'm going to give some advice on how to write a good realistic fictional narrative story with help from my own writing experience and one of my favorite novels, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov.

*Lolita* is one of the greatest realistic narratives of all time, and it also has one of the most controversial issues in any book. The book is centered on a forty something-year-old scholarly foreigner that moves to America after a divorce, Humbert Humbert. Humbert is extremely infatuated with little girls because of the loss of his true love in his teens. He takes up room and board in the house of a widow named Charlotte Haze, and upon first sight falls deeply in love with her young daughter Dolores, also called Lolita, who

shares an uncanny resemblance to his lost love. Due to circumstances I'm not about to spoil, Humbert and Lolita end up living together and traveling across the country as "father and daughter." As you could most likely guess, the story is a tad bit more complicated than that, but it also isn't as deranged and pedophilic as you could imagine, either. I chose this book because along with being one of my favorite books, it has many of the important qualities required in a successful realistic narrative story. The twists and turns provide a constant source of entertainment, while the plot build up and character design provide enjoyable reading when the story isn't at its thrill points. Using critical analysis, I can dissect the book and pick out what parts I find to be the most important for all realistic narratives.

Realistic narrative is one of the least restrictive writing genres, but a good narrative needs many things in order to live up to its full potential. Since narrative writing has few limitations, it can also be the hardest to write. Why is that, though? A good narrative requires a plethora of important things, and a realistic one requires even more. I'm going to provide a concept map of the levels of a realistic fictional narrative story and then describe the aspects that are involved in the story. After that I'll go into detail about designing a story's plot and characters. So without further ado, let's dive in!

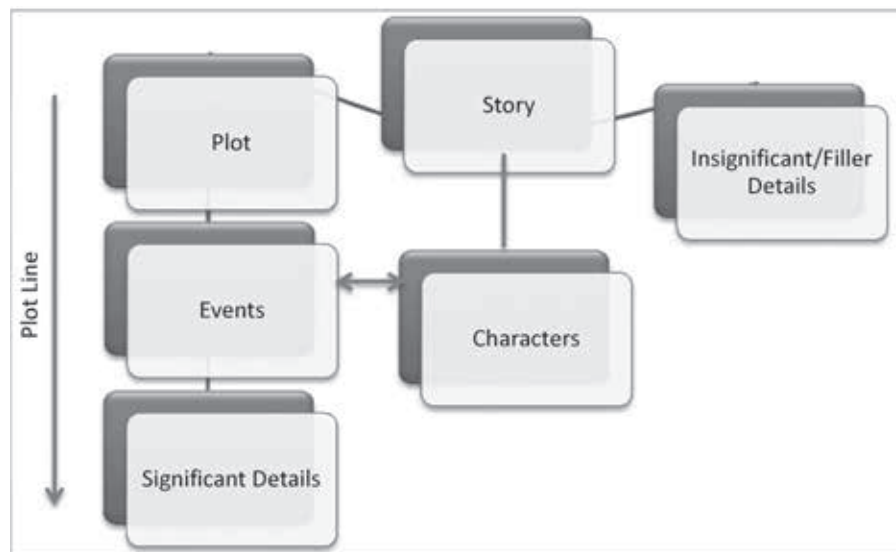


Figure 1: Hierarchical Diagram of Realistic Narrative Requirements

I've created this hierarchical diagram in Figure 1 so that you can get a better idea of what is going on in a story. The parts of a narrative include the story, which encompasses everything in the narrative, the plot, which provides a broad explanation of what happens in the narrative, the events, which are a more specific explanation of the plot, and the significant details, which

trigger or provide room for forward movement of the event. Others parts include the characters, which are the focus of the narrative and move the story forward, and lastly, the insignificant or filler details that provide the bulk reading material as well as maintain the readers' interest between the more interesting events. The way this works is that if something is above something else, then it is the broader part of the narrative. The connecting lines signify that the higher part of the diagram encompasses the lower part, so that the lower part has more specific information than the higher part. If a line connects something, it also means that alteration of a part of the story affects every other part connected by that line. An example of this would be if I were to change a significant detail, like Humbert's first view of Lolita. Say instead of becoming infatuated with her, he doesn't think she's that attractive. That would affect him living with Charlotte because he might move back to Europe and the overall plot wouldn't be centered on his love of Lolita. In addition, the plot line is time-related, as well as causal, which means that any changes in timing would also affect the overall narrative.

Another part of the narrative is what I call *aspects*, which influence every level of the plot line of the diagram and some of the character and insignificant detail parts. Our first aspect is originality, which is an idea, event, or sequence of events that has never been pursued before. This is followed by excitement, something providing a feeling of great shock or joy that's anticipated (the excitement in foreshadowing) or occurring. All of this must be provided using evidence, which is generally foreshadowing alone, and realism, the feeling of possible occurrence in real life. Deeper aspects include point aspects, an aspect that affects only one part of the narrative, and branch aspects, which influence two parts of the narrative that are capable or contorting each other. The only point aspect we will be focusing on is character design. As well as character design being the only point aspect, character to event is the only branch aspect we are going to deal with, and I denote them with a double-headed arrow line on the diagram. Now that you understand the requirements of a realistic narrative story, let's go into detail about the plot sequence.

## Your Plot, Your Story, Your Everything

You are the master. You control the Earth and the sea. You control Heaven and Hell. You are God...at least from this story's viewpoint. A plot is a collection of every event that occurs in your story and how they relate to one another, while an event is a collection of significant details associated with the event. Basically your plot is the backbone of the story. It's easy to say that without a plot, a story wouldn't be a story at all. I'm not even sure what it

would be...just a bunch of words on paper with no direction or point I guess. So the plot is really, really important.

Think about this for a moment: an attractive European man, scholar, multilingual...with a twelve-year-old American girl. Have you honestly ever heard of another novel that dives into pedophilia in such a romantic way—this plot is gold! Seriously though, other books don't have anything on this plot; it's exciting, nasty, romantic, thrilling, dastardly, suspenseful, and above all completely original! Without this plot, the story would be almost nothing. Plot in the story needs to provide the reader with a feeling of originality as well as excitement. Say Humbert was to come to America and fall in love with a woman his own age—nothing would be special about this novel. There must be countless novels about a foreign man coming to a different country and falling in love. Granted, this sort of book could provide excitement, but without originality, it's just a copy and paste version of any old book. *Lolita* has what many other books do not: *edge*.

When creating your plot, I recommend taking a sheet of paper and writing down potential ideas for the story. Maybe it takes place in a chocolate shop in Switzerland? Your character is a young girl who is part of a poor family when suddenly, out of nowhere, a handsome king swoops in and falls in love with her...wait wait wait. What happened? It was going so well but then you added a crazy situation and were blown completely off track. It's important to not allow something that seems too unrealistic to occur; start over. Your character this time is an Inuit girl named Ahnah who lives in Greenland during the 1900s. She lives a simple life with her younger sister and great-grandma who mean more to her than anything else in the world. Some foreign traders arrive at her igloo when a giant blizzard suddenly appears. She doesn't want them to die in the freezing cold, so she invites them in to stay with her family until it passes. The foreigners stay in her igloo through the storm, but after it's over, Ahnah's great-grandma seems extremely ill and is developing a serious rash on her neck. One of the foreigners says that he recognizes the rash as being extremely common from where he is from and that there is a cure for it in his hometown. She decides there's nothing she can do except go with them on their ship back to their hometown and receive the cure for her great-grandmother. Now that has some potential! It's important to provide details throughout the story that support the events that occur later on. The Switzerland example did not have supporting evidence earlier in the story showing that this is a realistic event. If we had provided some possible foreshadowing to the prince scenario, it could seem much more likely. Now that we have a good plot, let's look at some details to add in the story.

If the plot were the exoskeleton of a butterfly, then the details would be its muscles and blood. In the attempt to create something great, many

have fallen behind because of insignificant events in the plot. Anything that happens in the story is because of you. Even the most insignificant detail about a hair that is briefly mentioned in the story was put there by you, for a reason. That being said, do not let the story be boring enough to bring up an insignificant hair that is briefly mentioned for no good reason! Although you have complete control over your story, that alone doesn't mean that the story will be good.

A real life example could be shown in a classroom setting. Think back to a time when you were in math class, bored to no end, just wanting to get the material and get the heck out when someone in class raises their hand and asks a question about the morphology of a blue whale. Not only is this irrelevant to class, but your past experiences with blue whales are not the best, and your teacher for some reason loves this question and begins to go into intricate details about this majestic creature. This story is a good example of the “insignificant detail about a hair” scenario because it contributes nothing to the plot. If anything, it will provide the reader with something negative to take from the story. Second, it's just plain annoying and dull to read about and seems like filler information. Something I like to think about when I'm making up stories is the relevance each event has to the story as a whole. If a hair can properly be made significant to the story as a whole, then by all means leave it in there, but not at the price of dulling up the story.

Significant details, on the other hand, are very important to the entire story. As my diagram shows, significant details affect many things in the story such as events, plot, and the overall story. Creating these details can be tricky because they affect so many things! A strategy I use when creating significant details involves taking an event I have planned, let's say my character is a soloist at a choir concert, and writing down some possibilities that could occur. My character could mess up, leading to self-confidence issues in the future, or my character could do awesome and feel super confident for the next performance. Next, I try to write a few sentences for each of these significant details and think about which route I'd like to go the best. Something else I sometimes do is work backwards from a significant event I already have in mind. If I know exactly what I want to happen, then I can try and picture what would lead to this happening. Significant details take a lot of time to think up, but they are an important part of any narrative.

Filler details keep the reader interested and the story moving. Like I mentioned earlier, no one wants to hear about some insignificant hair; that gives the book nothing besides another paragraph to bore the reader. Let's look back at the Inuit example that I created. Think about what Ahnah is thinking throughout the journey. Has she ever even been on an ocean liner before? If she has, then she should be able to describe the things she knows

about the boat; if not, she should seem excited or scared about these things. “Oh my goodness, look at this circular thing with what seems to be small walrus tusks sticking out from them,” Ahnah excitingly thinks when she sees the ship’s wheel for the first time. I purposely made that exaggerated. The point is that the details of the ship (interesting ones) can keep the reader interested in the story.

### **Making a Creative Character: Not Really that Easy. . .**

Make a character, right now, in your head. Is it a boy or a girl, or maybe an animal if you’re extra creative? Think about how it looks: height, hair color, eye color, and age. Is your character in school or graduated? Maybe it has a family with a husband or wife. Give yourself a minute to think about these things; write them down if it helps. Try to fit it in the environment you created. What did you come up with? Most likely something not too complicated. A male college student, 5’10” with brown hair, brown eyes, and a girlfriend. Most of the people doing this exercise will probably think of themselves in a different form, just a tad bit different. It’s hard to create a unique character. This is where Vlad soars.

Humbert is a perfect example of great character design. He’s classy, enthusiastic, and twisted in an intriguing way, but what makes him this character I have so come to adore? Simply put, it’s Lolita. Lolita is the kindling as well as the spark that gives Humbert his fire! Characters in a story need a “Lolita” to make them who they are or push them to become what they need to be for narrative success. Desire gives characters a reason to be in there and moves the story forward.

Nabokov is great at finding the best plot/character combination. Everything each character in the story does fits perfectly with what you would expect the character to do. In the story, Humbert marries Charlotte in order to be able to be around Lolita all of the time. Humbert describes Charlotte as an ugly cow in his journal entries and has absolutely no attraction to her. In his journals, he describes how infatuated he is with Lolita. Readers learn to understand that Charlotte is a self-centered person who dislikes her daughter very much. When Charlotte inevitably discovers Humbert’s journal, she disregards the fact that he is infatuated with Lolita and is a complete pedophile, but instead is concerned about reading, “The big bitch, the old cat, the obnoxious mamma...” about herself (95). She calls him a monster and criminal not because he’s a pedophile, but because he thinks she is disgusting. She finally says, “You’ll never, never see that miserable brat again” (96). But she’s not trying to protect her daughter—she’s jealous and wants to hurt him! Charlotte is thus created to be a distasteful,

horrible woman who is jealous and hateful towards her own daughter, and this turns out to be a great turn of events in the story's plot.

My point is that making a good character is difficult and requires a lot of thought and blending with the events. A good character must have an interlacing with the events of the story and behave as no other character would. This ties to originality because if the character isn't original enough, other characters could fit and the story would lose value. With originality comes realism. Charlotte is both realistic because of her hurt feelings and original in that she places those feelings above concern for her daughter. Now that we have an example of a good character, let's look at how to make someone like Charlotte Haze.

After I have thought up a character, I try to fit my character with the perfect balance of originality, realism, and excitement. If the balance is right, you can meld the story to make the event golden. I also identify what my character wants. Giving your character desire always creates an opposing force that fights against this desire (like yin and yang or anti-desire). The best way for me to get ideas about my characters is by going to my favorite characters in movies, books, comics, or real life. I draw out a map composed of what characteristics I like about them and what I don't. Once that is done, I have a better idea of what I can do with my new character. Another important thing I do is simply think about my character a lot. If I spend a lot of time writing down their possible characteristics and desires, I eventually discover what the best mix is and am able to properly fit the story and characters together as one.

### **And in the End...Sick 'em Boy!**

There you have it. I have given you my analysis on realistic fictional narrative writing so that you can get started on writing the best possible story you can. I suggest you practice these skills over and over again to "sharpen the saw" if you will—I know I will! Being able to create something that no one else can is a great way to inspire the world, get a great grade in English class, or simply have fun! If in the future you forget these skills (which you won't), the fastest, most efficient way to dissect butterflies is right here in the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*.

### **Reference**

Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Lolita*. 2nd ed. New York: Knopf, 1992. Print. Vintage International Edition.



**Christian Zwick** was raised in Quincy, Illinois and is a chemistry major and honors student here at ISU. He spends a lot of his time studying as well as hanging out with his friends. Something he is proud of is his ability to spring back harder than before after experiencing defeat. "It's hard to keep me down," Christian says, "I often have a lot of funny scenarios playing through my head and I can never stay in a bad mood for too long." Christian's future goals include getting married and doing something beneficial for the human race in the science field.