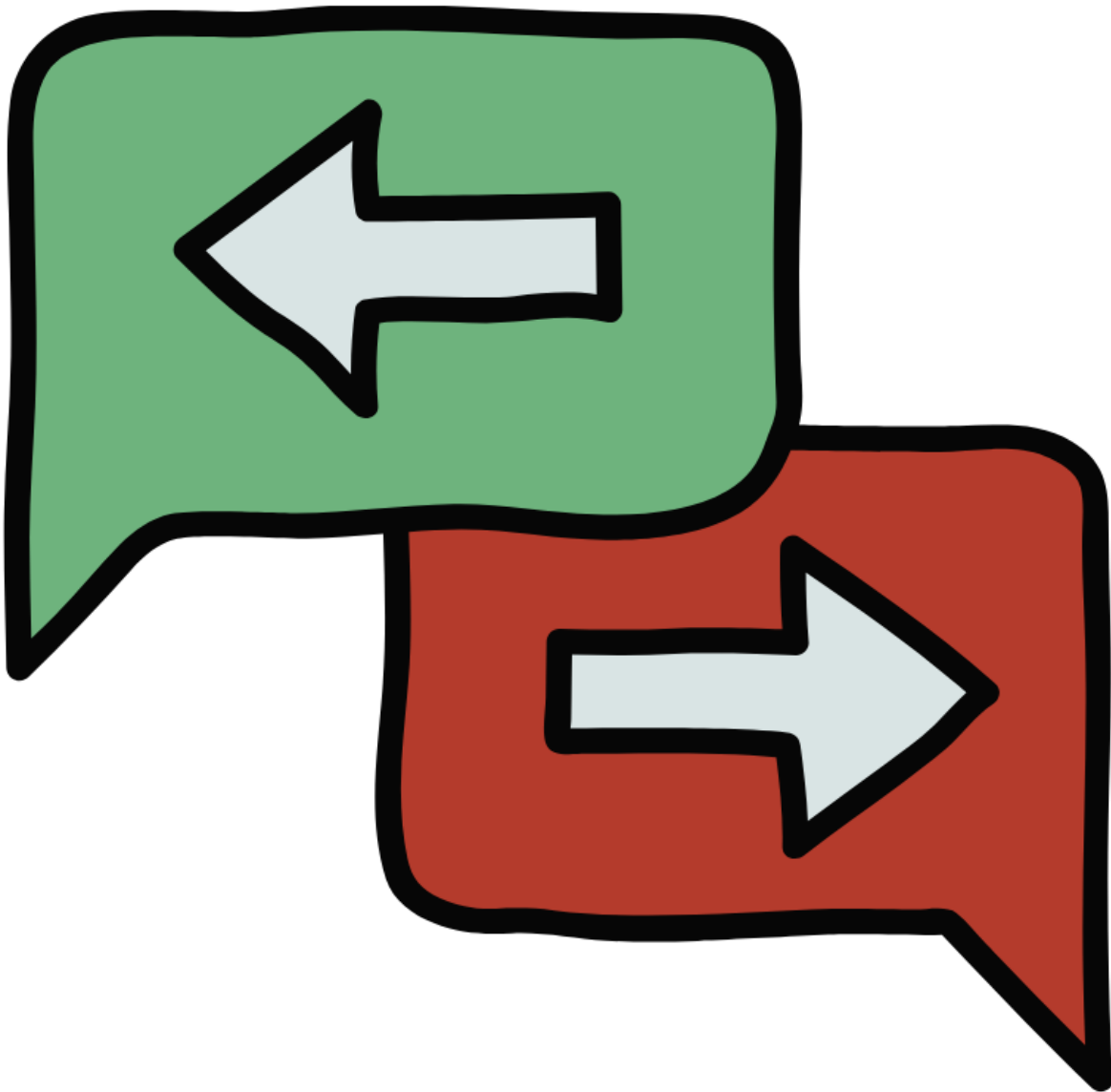




JANICE THOMPSON, AUTHOR

# Backstory Blues

 0 Comments



*Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goal.*

## Henry Ford

# BACKSTORY...WHAT IS IT?

Backstory is the part of the story that came before the part you're telling. For example, if chapter one of your story picks up in 2010 in New Orleans, the "backstory" might be what happened to the character years prior during Hurricane Katrina. This is a critical part of "who" your character is. It's his/her backstory, but it's (likely) what propels him/her in the current setting/plotline.

- **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**

- Is backstory a new term to you?
- Does your WIP (Work in Progress) have a backstory (something that happened before your actual story picks up)?
- How important is backstory to your project? Does your novel hinge on it?

## WHY DO WE USE BACKSTORY AT ALL?

One reason we use backstory is because we come into the story knowing our characters really well, but our reader doesn't, so we feel compelled to fill in the gaps.

- **QUESTION TO CONSIDER:**

- Think about your WIP. How much does the reader need to know about the backstory—and how quickly?

## HOW IS BACKSTORY DONE EFFECTIVELY?

When backstory is done well, you rarely even notice it because it doesn't take you

out of the story. It's sprinkled into [the plot](#) very carefully, in tidbits. You learn much about the character as a natural part of their journey. Snippets come out as we go along.

- **QUESTION TO CONSIDER:**
- Do you sprinkle in the backstory?

## HOW/WHY IS IT DONE POORLY?

I see this far too often. The writer wants to "catch the reader up" in the first couple of chapters and tell the backstory in its entirety. Bring you up to speed. Problem is, the reader doesn't want to know everything that happened to the main character right away. Why do you suppose that is? When you sit down to read a novel, you're looking to be entertained, not inundated. You don't want to read someone's family tree or listen to rambling details of a person's former life. It's truly better if you don't tell everything right away.

- **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**
- Have you loaded up your first chapters with "telling" sections?
- Can you think of a way to tell less so that you can "show" more at a later time?

## WRITER INTRUSION

Sometimes we lump too much information together and force-feed it to the reader without even realizing it. We'll be moving the story along quite nicely, then all of a sudden—*bam!* We interrupt the story to "explain" something.

This is known as "Writer Intrusion" and it frustrates the reader. Why? Because the writer has the audacity to interrupt the story to say, "Wait! Before I carry on with the story, I need to tell you—the reader—a little something about the character so you'll understand what's happening." This can be offensive to readers, but it also stops them dead in their tracks. They just want a story. . .not an explanation.

Author intrusion is really as much a POV issue as anything else, for you're interrupting the POV character to "tell" information that could come out more effectively in another way. And no reader wants to be told they're stupid. In essence, that's what happens whenever you stop the story to explain something.

- **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**

- Be honest now. . .Do you information dump?
- If you had to strike all of your lengthy "telling" sections, would it greatly affect your opening chapters?
- What is your take on author intrusion (concerning your WIP)?

## **WHY IS THIS A PROBLEM?**

The reader doesn't really care about your character in the first chapter. Sorry, but it's true. The reader is just getting to know your POV character at the opening of a book, so it's a huge stretch to ask her to bear with you while you "explain" something to her. It's going to take her out of the story if you add too much from the past at once. And by doing so, she cares even less about your character, not more.

- **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**

- How does it make you feel to know the reader doesn't really care about your POV character in the opening scene?
- How can you make the reader care more?

## **SO, THERE'S A BETTER WAY?**

Yes. Backstory can come out naturally in the flow of things. A little here, a little there. If your character has been through a tragic loss just prior to the first chapter, maybe

a line of dialogue alludes to it. Leave questions in the reader's mind. You want him/her to turn the page and move on to the next chapter. Keep your story in the present as much as possible.

If you need a detail from the past to come out, try a line or two of dialogue. Occasionally a flashback can be use (italics) but editors aren't keen on long sections of italics. If you are intent upon giving away a serious amount of backstory at the opening of your book, consider writing a very brief prologue.

- **QUESTION TO CONSIDER:**

- Establish a plan for how you will adjust your backstory, so that it comes out in slivers, not chunks.

## **CONSIDER THIS QUOTE ABOUT BACKSTORY:**

*...backstory is essential to novels. Characters have rich histories and typically their motivations are seeded in their pasts. But in the opening pages isn't the place to go into depth on those pasts.*

*The best method of incorporating characters' histories and motivations is to dribble in history/motives a little at the time. A few sentences here and there interjected into the action informs the reader, gives them the depth and insight they need to maintain that connection and to understand why the character behaves, thinks, and acts as s/he does, but it doesn't break the forward momentum of the story long enough to disrupt it.*

*<http://www.fictionfactor.com/guests/backstory.html>*

*(Backstory by Vicki Hinze; Fiction Factor – the Online Magazine for Fiction Writers)*

## LEAVE 'EM GUESSING

If a tragedy from the past serves as a motivator for your character, then let the reader wonder, "What's making him/her act this way?" Don't give it away. This is part of the mystery of the story.

*"Make them laugh, make them cry, but most of all, make them wait."* – Charles Dickens

## AN EXERCISE:

Go back to your opening chapters (say, the first three) and highlight places where you've used backstory. Look for "had" and passive verbs. These are indicators of "telling." Most poorly written backstory is in "telling" form.

## EXCEPTIONS TO EVERY RULE:

There are no hard and fast rules about backstory. And occasionally (say, in a comedy) you might actually get away with some deliberate telling—especially if it's written in comedic narrative. This can be effective, but must be so clever, so funny, that the editors/readers excuse you for "telling" when you should be "showing."

## LET ME LEAVE YOU WITH A FINAL QUOTE ON BACKSTORY FROM A FELLOW AUTHOR

*Someone asked how do you handle backstory of characters? How much do you show? How much can you just hint at? ...Certainly I feel like you create more depth in characters by not explaining everything. If you leave shadows — areas not fully*

*explained — then what you hinted at seems deeper and richer than if you fully explore it.* – [Wen Spencer, Science Fiction and Fantasy Author](#)

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**By JThompson**  
March 22, 2024



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