

All About Flashbacks

By: **Dave Trottier** | March 18, 2015

Although you often hear the advice to avoid flashbacks, they're perfectly legitimate if used properly.

Some basic guidelines include:

- *Don't tell the reader about the past until he or she cares about the future*
- *A flashback should not stop a movie just to provide exposition*
- *A flashback should move the story forward.*

You accomplish that last guideline by making the audience want to know what happened before the flashback, and then [writing the flashback](#) in a way that makes them want to know what's going to happen next. This is clearly the case in the "What happened in Paris" flashback of *Casablanca*.

Flashbacks can be [tricky to format](#), and many writers leave readers confused about what they just read. There are numerous correct methods of formatting flashbacks, but the overriding principle is to be clear.

Method 1—A flashback within a scene

In the example below, we label the flashback like we would a [montage](#).

FLASHBACK – TRAIN ACCIDENT

Barry sees the train speeding toward him and leaps from the tracks, but his foot catches on a rail tie.

BACK TO PRESENT DAY

The above method is designed for short flashbacks that happen within a scene.

For longer flashbacks—that is, flashbacks that comprise an entire scene—consider one of the following methods.

Method 2—A flashback that is itself a complete scene

FLASHBACK – EXT. TRAIN TRACKS – DAY

Method 3—Alternate method when a flashback is a complete scene

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS - DAY - FLASHBACK

Or

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS - DAY (FLASHBACK)

If you use either of the above notations, then the next scene heading would follow the same pattern and look like this.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY - BACK TO PRESENT DAY

Or

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY (BACK TO PRESENT DAY)

You can also use either of the above BACK TO PRESENT DAY notations for Method 2 as well.

If you wish, you may shorten the extension, as follows:

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY - PRESENT DAY

Or

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY (PRESENT DAY)

Alternate flashback endings for Methods 2 and 3

At the end of a flashback, you can use one of the following alternative methods to end the flashback.

END OF FLASHBACK.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

It would also be correct to place the phrase END OF FLASHBACK flush to the right margin followed by a period, as follows:

END OF FLASHBACK.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Method 4—A flashback longer than one scene

If a flashback is more than one scene in length, you will use Method 2 or 3 for your first flashback [scene heading](#). Subsequent scene headings will be written as normal scene headings without the word FLASHBACK. The reader will assume that each scene that follows that first flashback scene is part of the flashback until he sees END OF FLASHBACK or BACK TO PRESENT DAY in some form. Here's an example.

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS - DAY - FLASHBACK

Barry sees the train speeding toward him and leaps from the tracks, but his foot catches on a rail tie.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Barry lies on a gurney. A doctor pulls a sheet over his head.

INT. OFFICE - DAY - BACK TO PRESENT DAY

Or:

INT. OFFICE - DAY - PRESENT DAY

If you wish, it's perfectly correct to label each scene heading in a flashback sequence. For example:

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS - DAY - FLASHBACK

Barry sees the train speeding toward him and leaps from the tracks, but his foot catches on a rail tie.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY - FLASHBACK CONT'D

Barry lies on a gurney. A doctor pulls a sheet over his head.

INT. OFFICE - DAY - PRESENT DAY

Method 5—Flashback sequences

An alternative method is to label the entire flashback comprised of more than one scene as a flashback sequence.

BEGIN FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS - DAY

And then write out all the scenes in sequence, just as you would normally write scenes, and then end the sequence with this:

END OF FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Method 6—A series of flashbacks and flashback montages

Here's a question from a client that I think is instructive: *Suppose you have a situation where your character recalls different scenes from the past, some of which contain dialogue, as he puts the pieces of the puzzle together. How would you format that?*

In most formatting situations, there is more than one possible formatting solution that is “correct.” In this case, you could use a SERIES OF SHOTS, SERIES OF FLASHBACKS, or a MONTAGE. With any of the above three devices, it’s perfectly okay to include dialogue.

I suggest a FLASHBACK MONTAGE where you identify the location of each FLASHBACK to help the reader recall it along with the character. We could call these QUICK MEMORY FLASHES if your desire is for a quick succession of images. For example:

MONTAGE – JIM’S QUICK MEMORY FLASHES

However, in this particular case, it appears that my client wants to insert entire scenes in succession. I suspect you will be best off showing as little of those past scenes as possible—just the key moment of each to remind the reader. This was done to great effect at the end of *The Sixth Sense*.

In the example below, I made up the content just to illustrate one possible flashback solution to my client’s question.

FLASHBACK MONTAGE – JIM REMEMBERS

-- SUZY’S BEDROOM -- Jim spots a bottle of theater blood on Suzy’s dresser. Suzy laughs about it.

SUZY

Oh, my niece’s play.

-- RESTAURANT -- Suzy’s smile fades momentarily.

SUZY

Nature calls.

She leaves the table with her purse. Jim watches her follow a platinum blonde into the ladies room.

-- BEACH -- Jim notices the platinum blonde watching him from the pier above him. She turns her head. Jim shrugs his shoulders.

...And so on. If desired, you could replace the CAPPED locations above with complete master scene headings; for example: INT. SUZY’S BEDROOM – DAY. That would be perfectly fine. You could also use a non-capped version; for example: In Suzy’s bedroom, Jim spots a bottle....

Finally, you could use a different expression to identify the nature of the FLASHBACK MONTAGE, depending on your dramatic purpose. For example: FLASHBACK MONTAGE – JIM PUTS THINGS TOGETHER.

Naturally, if this MONTAGE takes place within a scene, then at the end, you would return BACK TO SCENE.

Method 7—Very quick flashbacks

If you want to shoot some quick flashes at your audience, use the montage format, as follows:

QUICK FLASHES – DUKE’S BASEBALL MEMORIES

-- Duke slides home safe. Jubilant teammates scramble to congratulate him.

-- Duke, playing shortstop, snags a hot grounder, and tosses the man out at first.

-- Duke swings at a fast ball and watches it sail over the left-field fence.

BACK TO SCENE

If you have just one quick flashback, use the following format:

QUICK FLASHBACK

Duke strikes out.

BACK TO SCENE

Here’s an interesting question I received from another client: *I have a series of quick flashbacks at the end of a short script that reference a character’s memories of three different people. Do I create three flashback headings, one for each flashback?*

You could, but I recommend you use my answer to Situation #1 above as your guide and create a series of QUICK FLASHES.

Method 8—Flashforwards

Flashforwards are rare, but they are occasionally used, as in *Slumdog Millionaire*, for example. Handle them just as you would flashbacks.

And keep writing!