

UNIT 7: DEVELOPING A COMPOSITION

- 7.0 Objectives
- 7.1 What is Composition?
- 7.2 Elements of Form in Narrating Beginnings
- 7.3 Elements of Form in Narrating Middles
- 7.4 Tying-up the Beginning, Middle and End
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 7.6 Answers

7.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, we will be able to:

- read and write essays using narrative as a tool for composition
- use signposts and transitions as the work of narrative
- utilise narrative to string together formal elements of the essay
- hold together the big picture of the argument alongside the details

7.1 WHAT IS COMPOSITION?

The word composition applies equally to pieces of performance and visual art as it does to writing an essay. It refers to the **organizing principles of all formal elements that bring a song, a picture or an essay together as a whole**. To understand the composition of a piece we must pay attention to the details or the smaller parts that make up the whole of a piece. In the case of an essay those are the **constituting rhetorical and structural functions** of paragraphs and the sentences in it. Especially the sentences that make the **narrative** of the essay visible. Narrative is the ability to narrate or tell a story where all its parts are logically and coherently connected and add up to the main point that we want to make. It is possible to narrate an argument in an academic essay just as well as the plot of a fictional story. **Narratives** have **beginnings, middles and ends** and are **located in time and place**. Two types of sentences that mark the movement of a narrative between its beginning, middle and end, and remind us of where and when the narrative is unfolding are - **signposts** and **transitions**. Signposts tell us explicitly where we are in an essay and point to where the narrative will move going forward or recount what was said before. Transitions are bridges built between one idea and another so that the movements in the composition are smooth.

In order to learn the details of composition, we will look at excerpts from an essay by Amrita Sher-Gil entitled “Modern Indian Art: Imitating the Forms of the Past” where she critiques modern Indian art. We will follow the narrative arc of Sher-Gil’s essay from beginning to end in order to understand formal elements that guide the composition of her essay.

Let us begin at the beginning of Sher-Gil’s essay, and read the introductory section.

Instructions for reading: *As you read, underline sentences that answer the following questions - Where is the narrative located? Does it shift from place to place? When is the narrative unfolding?*

Does it shift from time to time? Please note how we may utilise tenses to assert claims about the present by invoking the past.

Title: Modern Indian Art: Imitating the Forms of the Past

“IT SEEMS TO ME THAT I never began painting, that I have always painted. And I have always had, with a strange certitude, the conviction that I was meant to be a painter and nothing else. Although I studied, I have never been taught painting in the actual sense of the word, because I possess in my psychological make-up a peculiarity that resents any outside interference. I have always, in everything, wanted to find out things for myself.

With this tendency it is rather fortunate that in 1929 when our parents decided to take my sister and myself to Paris for the study of music and painting respectively, the great French professor Lucien Simon took a fancy to my work and admitted me to his studio at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Before leaving for Europe I had worked entirely from imagination, and, although I went through an academic phase in the first few years of my stay in Paris, I had never imitated nature servilely; and now I am deviating more and more from naturalism towards the evolving of new, and "significant" forms, corresponding to my individual conception of the essence of the inner meaning of my subject.

Lucien Simon never "taught". He made us think for ourselves and solve technical and pictorial problems ourselves, merely encouraging each of those pupils whose work interested him, in his or her own individual forms of self-expression.” (167)

(From Arvind K Mehrotra Ed. *The Book of Indian Essays* Black Kite, 2020. All quotations are from this edition.)

How does narrative work in the signposts and transitions?

- **What the title signposts:** It introduces us to the topic of the essay - modern Indian art. The subtitle gives us Sher-Gil’s opinion about modern art - that it imitates forms of the past. The task of the essay will be to narrate how she came to this understanding as a modern Indian artist herself.
- **Signposts that invoke time and place:** “I never began,” “I have always,” “In 1929,” “Before leaving,” “now I am,” “outside” “Paris” “Europe” “Ecole des Beaux Arts” “inner meaning”. Sher-Gil’s essay is about how modern Indian art is an imitation of past forms, in order to do so she gives her own aesthetic position in the present as it developed through time and in her journey and stay in Paris.

- **Transitions:** “It seems to me”- indicates personal opinion; “although”: allows for a logical connection of contradictory ideas; “with this tendency”- makes information in the previous paragraph relevant to the information in the new paragraph.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1 How does repeating the name Lucien Simon and his method of not-teaching in the last two sentences tie-up the composition of this section?

- 2: **Identify all the signposts of place and time** in the following quote from the same essay: “I worked for some time at the Ecole des Beaux Arts and I got prizes at the annual portrait and still-life competitions for three consecutive years. My work in those days was absolutely Western in conception and execution except for the fact that it was never entirely tame or conventional.” (168).

- 3: Sher-Gil goes on to say that “I had not in those days learnt that simplicity is the essence of perfection. One sees with such exuberance, uncritically, when one is very young that one is liable to sacrifice the artistic whole to unessential detail, if it happens to be pleasing to the eye. One lacks the faculty of discrimination, so essential to the production of true art.” (168) In this quote, which signpost words help Sher-Gil locate what commonplace uncritical knowledge she had in the past about art and what she currently knows in the present? Relatedly, **what allows Sher-Gil to transition from the commonplace perspective of the past to the present new knowledge?**

To sum up this section: Being aware of signposts and transitions helps keep the narrative movement of what we are reading visible. While writing, it helps to keep our own narrative consistent and logical as we pay attention to how we use the past, present and future to make and bolster our arguments. In addition, narratives also string together the formal elements of the essay as we will see in the next section.

7.2 ELEMENTS OF FORM IN NARRATING BEGINNINGS

The signposted movement of narrative in time and place that is bridged by transitions for smooth transport are the details as we would find on a road map. If we zoom out then we get the **form of the essay - the strands of its big ideas and the structures it employs to convey them**. Knowing the form of the essay one is reading or writing gives one a template or examples of what we might be aware of while reading and include in our writing. Further, these formal elements are what narratives string together to compose the whole of the essay. In this section, we will look at how the narrative picks up on some rhetorical and structural elements from the beginnings of essays.

In the previous section we met two formal elements:

- The title of an essay: it clearly states the **topic and what the author has to say about it**.
- A **beginning** or an introductory section that introduces a topic by **laying out context**. In the case of a personal essay, as Sher-Gil's is where she uses her own experiences and analyses those as a source of evidence, the context comes from personal anecdotes. Academic essays may set up context by recounting an important debate in the field or an important idea about the topic that the author means to either agree and extend or disagree with and replace with an alternate idea. The narrative uses signposts of time and place to establish a sense of a beginning.

What are **some other formal elements**? Let's look at another excerpt from Sher-Gil:

“[...] Towards the end of 1933 I began to be haunted by an intense longing to return to India, feeling in some strange inexplicable way that there lay my destiny as a painter. We returned at the end of 1934. My professor had often said that, judging by the richness of my colouring, I was not really in my element in the grey studios of the West, that my artistic personality would find its true atmosphere in the colour and light of the East. He was right, but my impression was so different from the one I had expected, and so profound that it lasts to this day.

It was the vision of a winter in India - desolate, yet strangely beautiful – of endless tracks of luminous yellow-grey land, of dark-bodied, sad-faced, incredibly thin men and women who move silently looking almost like silhouettes and over which an indefinable melancholy reign. It was different from the India, voluptuous, colourful, sunny and superficial, the India so false to the tempting travel posters that I had expected to see.

Before leaving for Europe [...] I conceived India through the medium of those unutterably mediocre specimens of fifth-rate Western art that still abound in the local exhibitions... I call this tourist painting, because it has all the characteristics of the tourist mind, being absolutely superficial, both pictorially and psychologically, impressions of impressions, where there is no room for artistic conception, penetration or insight.” (167-168)

Here are some additional **formal features** of the essay as seen in the excerpt:

- An old or **commonplace idea** that the author gives a **new perspective** on and shares. The change leading to a new perspective on the topic is the point of writing an essay.
- **Statements of ideas** are **backed up** with **evidence** that is usually a more detailed and convincing **description**.
- **Author offers critique** to show why an existing idea does not work and needs to be replaced with something new. The commonplace idea and its critique is a rhetorical formal element, which means this is a strategy authors use to logically persuade the reader about why one idea does not work and why the alternative is better.

Check Your Progress 2

1: Which sentences signpost Sher-Gil's change of perspective on how India is represented in paintings?

2: Find the sentences where Sher-Gil describes seeing India with her own eyes and asks how it is different from the India of the paintings she remembered. Don't forget the signpost of time and place that plays a role in this.

3 How does Sher-Gil offer stern criticism of the existing practices of art? What choice of words show her disapproval?

To sum up this section: An important part of the composition of an essay is to present a commonplace idea that most people agree on without thinking too much about it; the author then gives reasons for why it needs to be examined and finally provides an alternative perspective. Each of these claims have to be backed up with evidence. Detailed descriptions of sources, ideas or objects can often make up that evidence. These details bring us to what goes on in the middle of the essays as we narrate them as we will find out in the next section.

7.3 ELEMENTS OF FORM IN NARRATING MIDDLES

The middle of the essay is most of the essay. The middle is where ideas are worked out logically with evidence from all different types of sources especially the works of others. Narrative helps marshal the perspectives of other writers to help sustain and complicate what we have to say. From the previous sections we know that:

- the bulk of the middle will have to be devoted to expanding with evidence the claims made in the beginning
- the rhetorical formal element might be to set out an idea and persuade the reader about why that idea is inadequate
- claims of any kind require evidence and detailed descriptions of the sources, objects or ideas under discussion form one kind of evidence

The middle requires a more detailed structural and rhetorical nuancing of claims and building of evidence that includes other sources. It is important to keep tab on what the inclusion of ideas from other sources, such as quotation, summary or paraphrase allow an author in terms of the big picture of the composition.

Let us now consider some excerpts from the middle of Sher-Gil's essay:

“Those so-called paintings that depict an India where the sun shines with an inevitability only equalled by the mediocrity of conception and execution of that sunlight ...Those serene or sun-flooded landscapes, consciously naturalistic, with authentically Indian ruins in the “middle distance”, that serve as trademarks, conclusive, irrefutable proofs as to the genuineness of the article (manufactured in India), not one brushstroke of which conveys India really.” (169)

“My violent reaction to both the pictorial and psychological conventions of this type of painting and my own mode of pictorial expression will be understood to some extent when viewed in the light of my first impression of India as opposed to the picture I had mentally made of it, thanks to the above mentioned form.

And now I shall proceed to explain how one is to approach a picture to derive from it the maximum aesthetic enjoyment. In the first place, a Picture must be a Painting, which means that the picture of a chair or of a pair of boots must be aesthetically as satisfying and interesting as the portrait of a remarkably handsome man or charming woman. (The aim of art being the derival of aesthetic emotion from abstract beauty, the beauty, the vitality, of line, form, colour and design, as opposed to the pleasure derived from the prettiness of the object depicted in the picture.) I cannot stress this point enough, as it is of vital importance in the appreciation of works of art. It is the alpha and omega of all artistic and aesthetic knowledge.” (170)

“That beautiful phrase of Vincent Van Gogh's, "I want to express, want to express, with Green and with Reds, the terrific, the terrific human passions", conveys so exactly what I want to say, that I cannot resist quoting it here.” (171)

Are you able to spot these additional formal features in Sher-Gil’s body paragraphs?

- Ideas that have been declared in the beginning of the essay must be **developed** with the help of more detailed evidence in the middle of the essay. This is often done by **evidence that complicates the commonplace perspective**. Compositions of essays create opportunities when the readers’ perspective and experience can be complicated by additional layering of evidence or a turn of logic that allows one to see and experience old things in new ways.
- **Sher-Gil complicates the perspective** that the tourist paintings of India are just fine since they are painted in India by Indians. Para two is made up of transitions that use sign posts. Notice the signposts “above mentioned form”; also notice how Sher-Gil writes with an awareness of her own opinion. **Reflecting on one’s own opinion or argument as a way to reach out to the readers’ comprehension is another formal rhetorical feature of essays.**
- **Critique is followed up by an alternate perspective.** Having said what does not work about modern Indian art that only imitates western styles, Sher-Gil goes on to define the aesthetic of art that works. This clear statement is what the essay upholds as the new perspective that the reader may take away.
- **Quoting from sources** is an important formal aspect of essays because it shows that an author’s perspective is not isolated. Sher-Gill quotes Van Gogh because she says it conveys what Sher-Gil wants to say about the work of an artist. Quotes from sources can support the author’s perspective.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1 In paragraph 1 how does Sher-Gill develop her critique of the “tourist painting”?

- 2 Pay attention to the line “Indian ruins in the “middle-distance”. Does this tell us why Sher-Gil thinks that these paintings are a problem because they do not depict “India really”.

- 3 What is Sher-Gil’s perspective on art? Rewrite it in your own words and say how it is different from the perspective she has critiqued.

- 4 As a structural element of composition, how does Van Gogh’s quote bring a layer of depth to Sher-Gil’s statement art?

To sum up this section: A logical review at this juncture would be to ask what narrative as movement in time and space, and signposts and narratives have to do with all the formal elements this and the previous section have demonstrated. If we look at the excerpts of the middle sections of the essay, we will find that signposting and transitions continue to be used as strategies. The signposts continue to ground the argument as it moves back and forth in time and the transitions continue to be built between ideas so that the reader does not have trouble following them. The rhetorical elements (providing an alternate perspective, complicating arguments, finding support for one's ideas etc.) and structural elements (title, claim, evidence of different types, different types of paragraphs, quotations from sources etc.) are exactly the parts that a narrative narrates with the help of the signposts and transitions. This leaves the question of how to draw to a satisfying close all that an essay opens up in the beginning and elaborates in the middle.

7.4 TYING-UP THE BEGINNING, MIDDLE AND END

In the previous sections we met some formal elements that make up the parts of an essay from beginning to middle. It is the work of the narrative to make sure that the details of the parts add up to the composed big picture of the whole. In that we noticed that signposts and transition sentences enable that compositional coherence. In this section we will visit the **conclusion** of Sher-Gil's essay to see how it plays **a role in the connecting-back** and **tying-up** functions of the narrative, as it ensures that the big picture of the whole of the essay becomes evident.

Here are excerpts from the concluding section from Sher-Gil's essay:

“[...] Art cannot imitate the forms of the past (because, for one thing, imitation is a form of debility and so the work thus created will necessarily be feeble); it must draw its inspiration from the present to create the forms of the future.

I am an individualist evolving a new technique that, though not necessarily Indian in the traditional sense of the word, will yet be fundamentally Indian in spirit. With the eternal significance of form and colour I interpret India, and principally the life of the Indian poor, on the plane that transcends the plane of mere sentimental interest.” (171, 172)

Notice how the narrative functions in the concluding sections of an essay:

- Conclusions mirror introductions. The narrative reminds the reader of the **original propositions** made by the title and the introductory sections and the **conclusion offers a response** that reflects the new perspective on modern art that Sher-Gil offers.

In the second excerpt, we see the function of **narrative as connecting back to an idea raised in the beginning** of the essay.

- The narrative in the conclusion also considers a **bigger implication of the ideas being examined** in the essay. Sher-Gil takes personal experience to ultimately make a point with an implication that is not limited to her as an individual but has a greater significance. In this case, it is about the development of modern Indian art in a way that it represents the reality of India and the experience of Indianness.
- The three above points **serve to tie-up** the three main strands of ideas in Sher-Gil’s essay. The three ideas being: the links of modern Indian art and western form; the superficiality of representing, mis-represents the reality of India; individual style that pursues a subject for what expression color, lines and design allow is genuine art.

Check your progress 4

1: Write in your own words how Sher-Gil responds to her title “Modern Indian Art: Imitating the Forms of the Past” in her conclusion.

2: What other idea, as shown in quote 2, does Sher-Gil pick from the beginning to conclude in this section?

3: How does the narrative of the conclusion demonstrate that the composition of the whole picture of Sher-Gil’s essay is bigger than her personal annoyance with some style of painting?

To sum up this section: It is in the conclusion that the work of the narrative, its movements back and forth in time and place come to a final rest and fruition. It is the conclusions’ special task to ensure that readers leave with the big picture, with all the details from the beginning and the middle of the essay firmly fitted inside it. At the end of the drafting process, essay writers usually revise the introduction and conclusion together and write in the sentences that makes sure that the introduction and conclusion especially come together as an important part of how the whole of the essay is composed.

7.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have looked at narrative as a tool for composition. In an essay a coherent composition works at the level of paragraphs, sections, as well as the entire essay.

Narrative is made up of signposts and transitions that make parts of the essay cohere with the whole of the essay. In other words, composition is the ability to see (as readers) the big picture of an idea in an essay or the ability to plan (as a writer) the big picture that merits all the time spent on the details of developing ideas and the evidence for it.

Narratives also string together formal elements of the essay such as: title, topic, context for topic, commonplace ideas about the topic and the new perspective that will be offered. The details of these elements are worked out in introductory, body and concluding paragraphs.

In composing the beginning and the end of the essay, especially as we revise our drafts, it is important that we make sure that the conclusion revisits the premise of the title and the introductory paragraphs. Signposts and transitions sentences are often written-in during the revision of the essay draft to ensure coherence between parts and the whole.

7.6 ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1: Suggested answers-

Answer 1: The name is a bridge to paragraph 2; the not-teaching concludes from Sher-Gil's predicament as a learner who learns by herself as indicated in paragraph 1.

Answer 2: Signpost that indicates place: "Ecole des Beaux Arts". Signposting time: "I worked for sometime," "three consecutive years," "those days" "was never."

Answer 3: The signpost "those days" allows Sher-Gil to make a distinction between the old commonplace knowledge she had about art. Relatedly the idea of being young allows her to logically bridge the ignorance about art in the past to what she has learnt about true art since then.

Check your progress 2: Suggested answers -

Answer 1: "My impression was so different from the one I had expected, and so profound that it lasts to this day." "It was different from the India, voluptuous, colourful, sunny and superficial, the India so false to the tempting travel posters that I had expected to see."

Answer 2: "It was the vision of a winter in India - desolate, yet strangely beautiful – of endless tracks of luminous yellow-grey land, of dark-bodied, sad-faced, incredibly thin men and women who move silently looking almost like silhouettes and over which an indefinable melancholy reign."

Answers 3: Sher-Gil begins to be critical of the representations of India which are depicted in a “sunny and superficial” way. Her criticism gets very stern when she says that the specimen of western art that was used to represent India were “mediocre and fifth-rate.” Words like *deplorable* certainly make her disagreement apparent. However, it is the phrase “tourist painting” that fully persuades the reader of the lack of value and depth in the kind of painting she is describing.

Check your progress 3: Suggested answers -

Answer 1: Sher-Gil’s critique of modern Indian painting is developed in this section by paying attention to the details of some of the techniques of painting that she calls “cheap tricks of the trade” that must be learnt and forgotten. She gives another overused composition detail where historical monuments or “ruins” are always painted at “middle distance” as an example of a cliched recognition of a painting done in India. These details are more convincing than just a statement that this type of painting is not very good or inspiring.

Answer 2: These particular examples that refer to ruins that are set at “middle distance” draw the reader’s attention to the possibility that the Indian painters are still looking at the India that they are representing with the eyes of the Westerners, without any originality or innovation. This is perhaps the reason why Sher-Gil claims that these paintings don’t convey the real India at all.

Answer 3: Sher-Gil’s perspective on art is that it must bring out the abstract, as in hidden or unseen beauty of the subject of a painting. For instance, she suggests that a painting of a chair or a pair of boots must be painted with the same perspective as portraits of beautiful people. Painting objects to bring out their abstract qualities would involve paying focused attention to bring out the uniqueness of the subject being painted and the emotions that they evoke. Her perspective is different from the one she is critiquing because she does not believe in the superficial reproduction of painting to convey the prettiness of the subject.

Answer 4: Van Gogh’s quote, Sher-Gil feels, conveys exactly her own statement about art. Van Gogh’s words place emphasis on the passion he brings to his work of expressing an object with colors. This as Sher-Gil also hopes, appears to the reader to be a completely different project from imitating and replicating a style of art in representation. To Sher-Gil’s formulation this quote adds the additional element of excitement and passion that an artist feels in owning the subject of one’s painting in this individualist manner.

Check your progress 4: Suggested answers -

Answer 1: While the title of Sher-Gil’s essay, especially as she substantiates it in the body of the essay, indicates that the problem with modern Indian art is that it imitates the formal elements of past traditions, in the conclusion Sher-Gil provides a strong statement of an alternate view. She says that genuine art does not imitate the past because it would only be a weak duplicate if tried. Instead, she suggests that genuine art is inspired by the present to create newer formal elements that look ahead of its time.

Answer 2: Sher-Gil goes back to the idea of representing India in ways that are real and convey the spirit of Indianness in her own work that represents an India that is not just the cliché of what she calls inevitable sunshine.

Answer 3: As Sher-Gil talks about her individual style that has grown differently from that of modern Indian art, her concerns about what she represents about India gives the big picture of the essay a greater significance. She identifies transcending sentimentality to convey a depth in what she understands to be the reality of India. The problem then with this particular tradition of modern painting that Sher-Gil identifies is not merely that it is imitative and superficial but that it is unable to reach into the reality of India in a way that it matters. She also raises the issue that such paintings require the gaze to be of those who look at India with an outsider's eyes. Within this bigger picture, Sher-Gil's criticism does not sound like a personal annoyance.



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