

Explode a Moment and Shrink a Century: Playing with Time
Language Arts—Kaye
Adapted from Lane

“Time to a writer is like playdough in the hands of a toddler.”

--Barry Lane

The bases were loaded and it was up to him, but the coach asked him not to swing at the ball. He wondered why until he heard the coach whisper to the assistant coach, “They’ll never strike out that shrimp.” John was short and up until that moment he was very proud to be on the Little League team, but when he realized he was only on the first string because he was short and too difficult to strike out, he was very hurt.

John was a student in my Language Arts class. In his first draft of an essay about this experience he wrote, “It really broke my heart when the coach said that and because of that I walked up to the plate and struck out on purpose.”

In a conference I asked John to locate the big moment in the story. It was when the coach whispered to the other coach, “They’ll never strike out that shrimp.” I asked John to make that moment last as long as he could, because the more he could describe that moment, the more the reader would become him and feel the impact of the story. This is a paraphrase of what he wrote.

I could feel my cheeks flush red with embarrassment. I reached down and picked up the bat. It was cold in my hands. I looked up at the stands and I could see my father cheering. He was thrusting his fist up in the air and shouting something I couldn’t understand. I looked at the pitcher. The ball was moving up and out of his glove following his hand in one fluid motion. I swung before it was halfway there. ‘Stee-rike,’ the umpire shouted...

When John says, “What the coach said broke my heart,” the reader says, “Poor John.” But the more John describes the big moment in his story in great detail, the more the reader becomes John, and his essay begins to do justice to the emotions that underpin it.

One thing to keep in mind: what’s the significant moment in your story? If there is one, more often than not it needs more attention (and revision), and if there isn’t one, it frequently means there isn’t a real story yet and you have to spend more time considering your experience and the conflicts and changes that were going on.

EXPLODING A MOMENT: when a writer takes a sentence or two and explodes it, scattering details all over the page.

Here’s how Jan Wilson exploded a moment when she poured a quart of milk over her sister’s head in her essay. Notice how Jan makes the moment when she poured the milk last with a very long snapshot of the milk’s journey down her sister’s face. Why doesn’t she just say, “I dumped the milk over my sister’s head and she was a real mess.”? She wants to make the moment last, and she dug for physical details to prolong that moment. Exploding moments pulls details out of writers naturally. It gets writers digging deeper for thoughtshots, snapshots, and dialogue—anything to slow that moment down.

When we write, our entire lives are like a stretch of mountains and we can choose where to dwell. So, if I'm going to write about something that happened on an afternoon in February, I don't have to start my story with the alarm clock buzzing in the morning of that day. I can jump right into the afternoon like this: "It was the worst afternoon of my life." Once there I can dwell for pages on one moment that only lasted five seconds. Likewise, I can use one sentence to skip over large areas of time in order to get closer to my story: "He saw Madison in school daily during the last six months, but nothing would prepare him for what would happen that afternoon at the dance."

Writing is different from living. In real life, we can't rearrange reality and expect to get away with it, but as writers we have more freedom. When we write we need not do it the same way that we live, one moment at a time. We can jump right to the time that interests us the most. Writers can spend one sentence to cover years, and pages covering one important moment.

Think of a dramatic moment in time that lasted only a few seconds or minutes, but was very important to you. It can be something sad or scary, like a car accident, or happy, like coming down the stairs on a holiday morning, prepared to celebrate with your loved ones, or confusing, like to very first time you held your baby brother or sister in your arms. Try freewriting about this moment. Every detail you can think of will make that moment come alive and last longer. Read "The first dive" on page 4 for an example of how to explode a moment.

SHRINK A CENTURY: when a writer compresses time into a paragraph or two.

Here's an example of shrinking a large block of time from the sixth chapter of E.B. White's classic, *Charlotte's Web*. Notice how White not only compresses time, he characterizes it by giving specific examples to help the reader feel how Fern felt.

Chapter VI

Summer Days

THE EARLY summer days on a farm are the happiest and fairest days of the year. Lilacs bloom and make the air sweet, and then fade. Apple blossoms come with the lilacs, and the bees visit around among the apple trees. The days grow warm and soft. School ends, and children have time to play and to fish for trouts in the brook. A very often brought a trout home in his pocket, warm and stiff and ready to be fried for supper.

Now that school was over, Fern visited the barn almost every day, to sit quietly on her stool. The animals treated her as an equal. The sheep lay calmly at her feet.

Around the first of July, the work horses were hitched to the mowing machine, and Mr. Zuckerman climbed into the seat and drove into the field. All morning you could hear the rattle of the machine as it went round and round, while the tall grass fell down behind the cutter bar in long green swathes. Next day, if there was no thunder shower, all hands would help rake and pitch and load, and the hay would be hauled to the