**[Plot Development](http://mlheath.wordpress.com/2009/06/25/plot-development-memories-flashbacks-and-linear-progression/)**

**[Memories, flashbacks, and linear progression](http://mlheath.wordpress.com/2009/06/25/plot-development-memories-flashbacks-and-linear-progression/)**

Writers use a lot of literary devices to tell their stories. Two of the most popular are memories and flashbacks. Although similar, they are not the same.

A memory is simply that – a character remembering something that happened. It’s simple and can be very effective in character development. It’s brief, provides insight, and doesn’t break up the flow of the story. It can also be a good way to create intrigue, build suspense, and bridge subplots to the main plot. The key point here is that it’s just a quick trip inside the character’s head. It only becomes distracting if there are too many of them.

A flashback, on the other hand, actually takes the reader back in time to another place. This may be a quick detour or the plot may be reset, so to speak, at that point in time and move forward from there. Flashbacks show us something about the character, explain why he behaves the way he does, or expose something important to the development of the plot that would otherwise not be known.

The problem for many writers who use flashbacks is that they overdo it. They put in so many flashbacks it becomes distracting. Sometimes it’s hard to keep up if the flashbacks aren’t sequential. If the first flashback is a year ago, and the second six months ago, and the third two years ago it’s easy for the reader to get lost, especially when the flashbacks involve the same characters.

A much more common use of the flashback is to begin at a point very near the climax, then reset the story to a previous point in time and move forward from there, explaining how the character came to be in such a desperate predicament. This allows you to “hook the reader” right off the bat. Then the story resets and moves forward in a linear progression, building tension and suspense as it leads up to the point where the novel began. In essence, the whole story is a flashback but I prefer this technique to the quick detour because of the linear progression. It’s easier to follow, requires fewer “establishing shots,” and allows the story to flow without too many distractions.

In a story with numerous flashbacks it’s also helpful to have a linear progression with the flashbacks. For example, let’s say you’re writing about a serial killer. The main plot occurs in the present, but flashbacks can be used to explain how he became a serial killer. The first flashback might be when he was six years old and something devastating happened in his life. Then the second is when he’s ten and he first starts showing tendencies toward violence. The third is when he’s seventeen and he assaults a young girl who lives in the neighborhood. Then the fourth is when he’s twenty-two and he kills for the first time. This type of linear progression within the flashbacks explains in a logical manner what transpired to create the psyche of the killer. In this example, the use of flashbacks is critical to the story and more effective than if we simply started when the killer was six and moved to present day.

One interesting note about linear progression – it doesn’t have to be forward.

In summary, memories and flashbacks can be very useful tools in character and plot development. But you should be careful to not overdo it. Too many can disrupt the flow of the story and can be confusing. Also consider using a linear progression, even with your flashbacks. Life happens that way. Time marches on, as they say. Perhaps for that reason, it’s easier to follow a plot that has a linear progression.