

## Proper Use of Flashbacks or Backstory

By Azalea Dabill

Flashback can be used in a prologue or your first chapter. Or elsewhere. Be wary. Ask yourself if it is critically important that this information be told this way, at this point, for the story to make sense. If yes, *show* the flashback as a scene, not summary alone. Be careful of using “had” too much. After the first “had” or so, to set your scene solidly in the past, continue writing as if the past were the present. This makes your writing flow.

Flashbacks can be as long as a chapter, a scene, or a sentence. On the sentence level, sometimes called a *backflash*, flashback works well as dialogue or internal monologue. Another character can ask a question referring to the past, or the POV character can think about the past with a backflash. However long the flashback is, make sure it adds critical content to your story.

Here is an excellent example of a flashback summary sentence and the following scene from Robin McKinley’s *The Blue Sword*.

She hadn’t any choice. She had known, because her father had told her five years ago when her mother died, that she would have no inheritance; what money there was was tied up very strictly for the eldest son. “Not that Dickie will mistreat you,” their father had said, with the ghost of a smile, “but I feel that, with your temperament, you had best have as long as possible a warning to resign yourself to it. You’ll like being dependent on your brother even less, I fancy, than you like being dependent on me.” He tapped his fingers on his desk. The thought that lay silent between them did not need to be spoken aloud: that is was not likely that she would marry.

This summary sentence and scene tell us a lot about the heroine and her relationship to her brother and father. It adds to her story. I invite you to read the first chapter of *The Blue Sword*, where the flashbacks are abundant, and tell me what you think.

*Note: Some of McKinley’s work is older, and it does not follow current style, but her writing is extraordinary. She is a writer I follow. (Note: not all her works have clean morals. The Blue Sword, Deerskin, Beauty, and Rose Daughter are good. A brief mention of a minor character’s past actions is the only drawback in Blue Sword, and Deerskin has a rape scene, though it doesn’t go into nasty details.)*

*In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.*