

Lesson 5: Flashback

In a fictional passage, when a character pauses to remember something that happened prior to the current action, this is called a **flashback**. The purpose of a flashback is to make a comparison between the present action and something that happened in the past, or to provide additional background information about the characters. This technique may also add suspense to the narrative.

DIRECTIONS: *Read the passage below about a high school senior named Cornelia and the moments before her student council speech. Then answer the questions that follow.*

- 1 Cornelia breathed deeply, trying to remain focused. *Only two more speakers and it's my turn*, she thought. It was senior student council elections, and the auditorium was packed. Each time she glanced out at the audience, her heart raced and her head felt dizzy.
- 2 This would be Cornelia's first time making a student council speech. She had rehearsed her speech repeatedly in front of a mirror, but now, all memory of her words had drained from her. She clutched at her index cards so hard her knuckles hurt.
- 3 Instinctively, Cornelia glanced over at Bonnie, her best friend, who was sitting a few seats down. Bonnie was running for student council president. As usual, she looked perfectly calm, her legs crossed neatly, her face relaxed and alert. *I wish I had her courage*, thought Cornelia.
- 4 They'd met back in sixth grade. Cornelia was gawky and shy back then, the kind of kid who was always afraid to speak out in class. But when the drama teacher, Mrs. Norland, had put the vivacious new girl in charge of recruiting for a class play, Bonnie had picked Cornelia to play the lead role.
- 5 "I don't know how to act," Cornelia remembered whispering.
- 6 "Relax," Bonnie had said. "Just do your best."
- 7 So Cornelia had learned all her lines backwards and forwards, and at the end of the performance the audience had responded with thunderous applause.
- 8 Soon they became fast friends. With Bonnie at her side, Cornelia no longer felt shy. In fact, she felt like a different person altogether—bolder, happier, freer.
- 9 Still, she'd gotten in the habit of seeing Bonnie as the leader, herself as the follower. In fact, she tended to view herself as an imposter—as if her sixth-grade self were waiting around, threatening to emerge at any second.
- 10 But was this really true? Was she being fair to herself?
- 11 After all, it was Cornelia's idea to run for student council secretary. Bonnie hadn't prompted her. It was Cornelia who came up with the posters, who invented the slogan, who wrote the speech. In fact, the more Cornelia thought, the more clearly she realized that all the qualities she admired in Bonnie were *hers* as well.
- 12 *I'm brave too*, thought Cornelia. The words filled her with a sense of calm. She breathed in deeply and straightened her back, smiling out at the audience. Whatever happened, she was ready for it.

Focus Lessons **North Carolina**

1. How does the flashback in this passage add tension to the narrative?

2. What do you learn about Cornelia and Bonnie from the flashback?

3. Is there a way for the writer to provide the reader with this same information, without using flashback? Would another technique be as effective as using a flashback?

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**For more information on flashback, see
Glencoe Literature, Course 4, pp. 64 and R5.**