



Telling Tales with Transitions

*tips for using transitions
in fiction and nonfiction to
effectively tell your story*

a special publication from Firebelle Productions

While the vast majority of what I write is nonfiction, I often rely on fiction writing principles to present information more effectively. Nowhere is this more important than when I tell a client's story as part of my paralegal job at Abronson Law Offices—a job unrelated to Firebelle Productions.

This newsletter focuses on using transitions to move a story along and contains both fiction and nonfiction examples. Such transitions are often used to quickly summarize information that doesn't warrant in-depth treatment, to bypass things that add nothing to the story, or to move past potential problems. (Names and details have been changed in nonfiction examples to protect client confidentiality.)

Transport Readers Through Time and Space

Good writers transport readers from one scene, setting, or event to another without losing momentum. How do they do it? For one, they plunge right into the action. They skip all the “stuff” that slows people down in real life.

The simplest of all transitions provides a brief reference to time. With text as concise as *later that day*, you can move readers past hours of boring activity that adds little to the story.

Later that day, we spotted the suspect's car in the airport parking lot.

The nonfiction example below transports readers through six months of safety complaints in a single paragraph. We could detail the many complaints voiced over those six months, but it would be tedious and boring. This isn't a story about complaints. It's a story about the harm this client suffered in a fall.

It wasn't until after Mr. O'Reilly moved into the trailer in early April that he realized the stairs were unsteady. Mr. O'Reilly complained to the Barretts several times in the months after he moved in, repeatedly asking them to repair or replace the steps. However, Mr. Barrett claimed he didn't have the money to do so. Even after hard September rains caused the stairs to shift on the wet soil beneath them, the Barretts refused to do anything to make the situation safer.

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On October 19, as Mr. O'Reilly was descending the steps from the trailer, the stairs shifted under him without warning, causing him to twist and fall from the top step to the ground below.

The following fiction example moves characters through time and space.

"We need to go back to the crime scene." Eric closed the file and tucked it under his arm. "Here, you drive," he said, tossing the keys to Mary, not waiting for a reply.

Twenty minutes later, the CSIs ducked under the yellow barrier tape. "What are we looking for?" Mary asked.

Notice how quickly we got from the lab to the crime scene. In real life, the CSIs would have discussed their objectives during that 20-minute drive, but it would be boring in written dialogue and would slow the action. So for the sake of story, we move the conversation to the crime scene and skip the commute.

Most commutes are boring. So unless you've got something exciting planned along the way, go straight to the destination. If you include the journey at all, use only as much as is needed to reveal character or move the story forward. The fiction example below follows a volunteer firefighter en route to "the big one."

"Damn these useless red lights." Greg pounded his fist on the steering wheel, watching Engine 10 pull through the intersection that he couldn't cross in his personal vehicle. The column of black smoke was bigger now, and the adrenaline surging through Greg's system made him jittery. Mentally, he was already on the nozzle, crawling on his belly searching for victims who may be trapped in the inferno. Physically, he was stuck in traffic with dozens of looky-loos who had no business impeding his path.

By the time Greg finally checked in at the command post, the incident commander had called for a second alarm. From the looks of things, a third wasn't far behind.

Here we linger in traffic long enough to feel Greg's frustration at being detained, but we're not stuck there as long as he is. Nor do we have to watch Greg park his car and don his protective gear. Instead, we catch up with him at the command post and will soon see Greg's view of an inferno that's building faster than incoming resources can handle.

This example packs a lot of punch into very few words. We reveal a lot about Greg's attitude toward people or things that slow him down and about Greg's sense of his own importance. He's a hotshot ripe for conflict, but we don't say it directly. We let readers come to their own conclusions. So this transition not only transports readers through time and space, it also enhances the story with valuable character details presented in a compelling way.

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Skip the Shit, Shower, and Shave ... Unless ...

I don't remember the clever author who so crudely admonished his audience to skip the boring parts, but I'll never forget the sage advice to "skip the shit, shower, and shave." Readers know without being told that we all have certain routines in the morning. So cut to the interesting parts, and skip the stuff that slows the story.

Mundane activities aren't taboo, but they must be purposeful. In the fiction example below, we reference Sara's morning shower just long enough to reveal a tidbit about her character. Something about spying her love interest before class is more important than a nice leisurely shower. We don't know what yet, but we may soon find out.

Sara yearned for her usual long, hot shower, but there wouldn't be time if she hoped to catch a glimpse of Kevin before her EMT class. She made do with a less-than-satisfying quickie and dashed off to school.

If you don't overdo it to the point of becoming cliché, you can use routine activities as a plot device. For example, let your detective cut himself while shaving. As he dabs at the blood on his chin, he has a revelation about the blood spatter pattern he had seen at the crime scene. Now the answer that had been eluding him becomes clear.

Although I used the concept of "shit, shower, and shave" figuratively to represent *any* boring material that could and should be cut, there are indeed times when we want to include a bathroom scene. The paragraph below comes from discovery responses I wrote for a client disabled after a botched knee replacement surgery. It's important to show how the simple things that most people take for granted are a struggle for her.

It is very difficult for me to bathe and dress in the morning. I haven't been able to shower in months, because it's too painful to stand and because even the water falling on my knee aggravates it. I am forced to take baths instead. But baths are difficult too, because I can't get in and out of the tub by myself. I need to be helped by my husband.

The following is another example written on behalf of a client who is mostly confined to a wheelchair after a fall. His condition is complicated by his weight and his need for an extra large motorized wheelchair.

Public places that are wheelchair accessible are not always wide enough to accommodate my extra wide wheelchair. This is particularly true of restrooms, even if they are supposedly handicapped accessible. When I go out in public, I usually have to blanket my wheelchair seat with disposable chucks so that I can relieve myself in the chair. It means soiling my clothes and sitting in urine or feces until I can get home and do something about it, but it's the best I can do if I can't use a public restroom.

**Skip the
"shit, shower,
and shave"
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Transition Through Tedious Parts

The example below is another one that transports readers through several months of activity in a single paragraph. While I could have detailed the client's recovery post-surgery, it would have made the mediation brief tedious to read. Instead, I quickly summed things up in one paragraph, then transitioned to the compensatory injuries that became worse over time.

Post-surgery, Dr. Williams repeatedly noted that Ms. Fuller's right knee and ankle were healing well. However, in the months that followed, Ms. Fuller still had considerable weakness around her right knee and significant atrophy from prolonged immobilization. She also developed pain in her left leg from compensating.

By July 2011, Dr. Williams had shifted his focus on other orthopedic complaints arising from the original injury. He documented that Ms. Fuller had pain extending from her right hip down to her ankle. She also had neck pain due to the resulting stress and tension.

Writing transitions like this is relatively easy. Letting go of the desire to be thorough is not. There was a time when I felt compelled to chronicle the waxing and waning of a client's symptoms during the many medical appointments on the road to recovery. However, the more detailed the story, the more it bored me as a writer. If I was bored writing the story, no doubt others would be bored reading it. That realization enabled me to see that I could create a more compelling story by transitioning through the tedious parts and focusing on the highlights.

Transition Through Problems

The example below is one in which I transport readers through time to solve a problem. Our client was injured in a fall. However, there was no mention of the fall or the resulting injuries in his medical records for two and a half months, despite multiple doctor appointments.

This sticky wicket created the appearance that our client wasn't injured in the fall and that his current complaints were unrelated. In reality, the doctors at the VA medical facility deferred dealing with those injuries until it fit into their patient care model. They likely also downplayed our client's concerns. I needed to navigate through the void in the medical records in a way that both explained it and got beyond it quickly.

Mr. Varney was seen several times at the VA medical facility in Palo Alto, where doctors initially focused on preexisting conditions for which Mr. Varney was already scheduled to receive ongoing treatment. It also took time to receive the appropriate referrals. So it wasn't until November 12, 2011, that doctors turned their attention to the unresolved pain from the subject incident.

You can transport readers through otherwise tedious material using skillful transitions.



You can often create a more compelling story by focusing on the highlights and leaving out extraneous details.

The following example, also from a mediation brief, was even more daunting to write. Our client had been injured in an automobile collision three years earlier, but she still had no diagnosis for her lingering chest, neck, and back pain and no recommendations for future treatment. The problem was two-fold. Her doctors weren't aggressive enough in evaluating and treating her injuries. Nor was the client being as proactive as she could have been. Justifiably, our opposing counsel questioned the sincerity of her claim when there's little evidence that her current complaints were due to the three-year-old collision. I had to keep connecting the dots while conveying some of the reasons why we lacked solid answers about her injuries.

Over the next several months, Ms. Quinn experienced minimal improvement. However, her circumstances led her to tough it out despite the lingering pain. She changed jobs twice after the accident, then moved cross-country with her two teenagers. Her job also required a lot of travel. Between the heavy travel schedule and her reluctance to take personal time off from new jobs, she mostly endured the pain.

On July 23, 2010, however, Mr. Quinn's chest pain was severe enough that she went to the emergency department at County General, where she was seen by Dr. Steven Moore. A chest X-ray showed no acute findings, so Dr. Moore discharged her with pain medications and a diagnosis of chest pain, but no definitive answers for the symptoms she had been experiencing since the collision.

As recommended by Dr. Moore, Ms. Quinn set a follow-up appointment with her primary care physician. However, by the time she saw Dr. Kay Madej on September 7, 2010, the chest pain flare-up had resolved, so no further tests were done.

Not long after, Ms. Quinn's pain returned. On October 3, 2010, she saw Dr. David Tupper for complaints of upper, mid, and low back pain, which she rated as a 7/10. She also complained of chest and forehead pain. Dr. Tupper took multiple X-rays, but found no abnormalities and nothing to account for the pain that had plagued Ms. Quinn since the collision. He treated her with cervical, thoracic, and lumbar manipulations and sent her on her way.

Discouraged by the failure of every healthcare provider to explain the unresolved pain, Ms. Quinn focused on changing her lifestyle instead. She gave up quilting, softball, and other activities that she once enjoyed, because these hobbies bothered her neck and back. She took more frequent breaks from working at a computer to relieve the tension. Yet no matter what she tried, she continued to suffer.

With trial fast approaching and still no solid answer for her chronic pain, Ms. Quinn went to Central Urgent Care, where she was seen by Dr. Richard Norton. Dr. Norton diagnosed her with lumbago and prescribed Neurontin and prednisone. He did not, however, identify the injuries caused by this accident.

Once our client finally insisted on having MRIs done, we learned that she had disc bulges with impingement on the thecal sac around spinal cord. But the lengthy delay made it harder to prove that her injuries were caused by the collision.

Transitions can be used to move past potential problems.



The goal isn't to bury problems but to create a plausible path through sticking points.

Change Gears without Jarring Readers

It is not uncommon, particularly in fiction and creative nonfiction, for writers to change gears at the start of a new chapter. For example, they may switch to another character's point of view for the next part of the story. Or they may use the break as an opportunity to bring in information that didn't fit in the previous chapter.

Even when well-done, these jumps can be disruptive. Readers are emotionally invested in learning what comes next as they turn the page. Instead, they are yanked into an entirely different scene. We can get away with this, but we must play fair.

The next example comes from the book *Laci: Inside the Laci Peterson Murder* by true crime writer Michael Fleeman. Fleeman's book is a gripping, informative account of the Laci Peterson murder and is, on balance, a well-written piece. But every once in a while, there's a gotcha that stops readers in their tracks because something doesn't flow well.

The first chapter ends at the point where Scott Peterson supposedly returns home from a fishing trip on December 24, 2002, to find Laci gone. Then the first sentence of Chapter 2 starts with, "*It would be officially ruled a 'justifiable homicide,'...*"

I didn't get any further before I asked, "Are you nuts? Laci's death was *not* ruled a 'justifiable homicide.' What idiot author would make a statement like that anyhow?" Fleeman's credibility sunk faster than Laci's body on the descent to her watery grave.

When I finally forced myself to read the rest of the sentence, I learned that Fleeman wasn't referring to Laci, but to a dishonest saloonkeeper and political leader gunned down in 1890. Fleeman had jumped to a brief history of Modesto's unsavory past and how the city had since then evolved into a spirited community that would band together in an effort to bring Laci and her unborn child home. However, the transition is so jarring that it doesn't work.

He returned home, [Scott Peterson] would later say, to the green house at 523 Covena Avenue in the late afternoon or early evening, just hours before he and his wife would go to her mother and stepfather's house nearby for Christmas Eve dinner. As he pulled up to the house, he saw his wife's car—the 1996 Land Rover—parked in the driveway. The house was empty.

There was a message from his father-in-law on the answering machine reminding them to bring whipping cream to the dinner. There was no message from Laci.

* * *

Changing gears at the start of a new chapter can be disruptive to readers who are emotionally invested in what comes next as they turn the page.



We can get away with changing gears, but we must play fair.

Chapter 2

It would be officially ruled a “justifiable homicide,” though the man could have been shot in the back while lying asleep and it would have still been called that. That’s how much the people hated Barney Garner. This was in the final decade of the 1800s, and Modesto, California, was very much a wild Western railroad boomtown. Wheat fields surrounded the community. The wheat brought prosperity, and the prosperity brought vice in the form of brothels, gambling houses, dance halls and opium dens, many of them located along the notorious Front Street. As one former mayor would recall, “Money was spent with recklessness and prodigality that baffled understanding.”

The subsequent three-page history lesson that Fleeman provided added little to the book. No one would have missed it if Fleeman had instead gone straight to the early days of the search for Laci. But it’s Fleeman’s book, not mine, so he gets to choose the content. What he needed, though, was a better transition versus a not-so-clever ploy that misses the mark with readers. He could have used something like the following paragraph.

The response from the community was overwhelming. Family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers moved by the news reports put their holiday plans on hold to search for the expectant mother whose smile would touch millions around the globe. But the people of Modesto weren’t always so selfless.

A paragraph like this maintains continuity from the first chapter, while providing a segue to Modesto’s past. However, even with this smoother transition, there’s no way to go back to 1890 without taking the focus off Laci’s disappearance. I would have omitted the history lesson were it my book.

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Transitions can be used to quickly summarize information that doesn’t warrant in-depth treatment, to bypass things that add nothing to the story, to move past potential problems, or as seen above, to connect seemingly unrelated material. But transitions must not create problems of their own by being so jarring that readers can’t follow along.



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**Transitions can sometimes be used to connect seemingly unrelated material.**



**However, they must be done well, or they will fall flat and confuse your readers.**