



HOW TO WRITE A RECOUNT

What is a recount?

It's a **personal narrative**. Here's an example:

Skydiving is dangerous. My friend went skydiving. It was his first jump. He was supposed to be filmed by an experienced jumper – a guy with a video camera on his helmet. My friend jumped out successfully with his guide. Trouble is, the guy with the camera almost never made it. He was wearing stabilizing guide flaps under his arms – like a flying possum. As the cameraman went out the door of the plane, one of his flaps caught on a bolt beside the door. He hung there – flapping. There was only one other person in the plane – the pilot – and he couldn't leave the controls. Should he land the plane and risk killing his mate, or should he wait and hope the cameraman could free himself. Agonising minutes went by. Finally, somehow, the cameraman clawed his way back against the slipstream, freed the flap, and fell to earth. Afterwards, knowing he had nearly died, he cried for an hour. My friend is never going back to something so dangerous.

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What are the stages (or parts) of a recount?

A recount is a **story**. It should have

A BEGINNING (or exposition)

A MIDDLE (or development)

And

AN END (resolution and conclusion)

...

In the skydiving example...

BEGINNING: The friend and the cameraman go up in the plane (***exposition***)

MIDDLE: The cameraman gets caught, and struggles to free himself (***development***)

END: The cameraman lands, and we learn of the aftermath. (***resolution and conclusion***)

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What is the shape of a recount?

Notice that the story is ***not*** a ‘flat’ or simple retelling. It has a distinct **shape**:

(***Diagram showing a main peak in the narrative and resolution a falling section***)

Many stories have these ‘peaks’ and ‘troughs’. Sometimes the ‘up and down’ pattern – and particularly the peak idea is called ‘suspense’ – a word more commonly associated with fiction. That’s because a good recount is like a fictional story. It is structured to keep the reader’s interest.

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No matter what the topic of the recount, try to make it as interesting as possible. This sort of thing is to be avoided:

Then we went to see the elephant. Then we saw the gorillas. Then we had lunch.
Then we went to the butterfly house. Then we listened to the animal doctor.
Then we got on the bus and went home.

If we made this recount into a shape, it would look like this:

A _____ B

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What can a recount be about?

Any personal story can be used. The story is normally about something that has happened to ***you***, though you can write about what happened to someone else too.

You can write about:

- Dramatic or frightening events eg Getting lost, nearly drowning

- A useful or exciting experience eg Visiting Paris, going to Disneyland
- Meeting (or knowing) someone interesting eg Your grandfather, a war veteran
- A retelling of someone's else's story (in your words) eg The story of the Wright Brothers or the story of the Titanic (here it is *your* version which is 'personal')

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How can you get the most out of a recount?

People have been writing stories for centuries. Here are some 'tried and true' tricks which will really add flavour to your writing. We'll call them the 'four Ds' of exciting storytelling:

- DIVING IN
- DRAMA
- DIALOGUE
- DETAIL

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(A) DIVING IN

A story needs a beginning, middle and end. But you might like to **change** the order. It's a trick often used by fiction writers. They start in the middle of a wild scene. Having got the reader 'in', got him or her *excited*, they (you) can then go back and fill in the beginning (and move on to the end) later.

Here's a short example:

A wave broke over me, and I went under again, choking. Sinking, I thought my life was about to end. The sun was shining brightly on the surface of the sea, mocking me. My lungs were bursting. I rose up out of the water, gasping, splashing desperately. The shore was only 20 or 30 metres away. There were hundreds of people on the beach, and not one could see me. I was drowning.

This dramatic opening takes the reader straight to the most horrible moment in the recount. There is no introduction, no lead up - just a leap right into the middle of the story.

This trick is so famous amongst writers that it has a name - '*in media res*' (meaning 'plunging into the middle'). You can then go back to sketch in the beginning of the narrative - knowing that the reader will not desert you because he/she now knows how bad things got, and wants to find out (in this case) *how* you got out of trouble.

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(B) DRAMA

All good stories are built on drama. What is drama? It is the conflict between people or between people and a situation.

The first sign was the smell of smoke. It was total fire ban day - the temperature already nearly 40 degrees - and a strong north wind. We were working on the new house. My Dad was up on the roof hammering away. Suddenly he stopped.

'Can you smell it?' he yelled.

'Yes. And I can see smoke. Just over the hill!'

Minutes later, we were in the car. We powered up the hill. Not a word was said. On either side of us was thick bush.

We crested the rise, and our hearts sank.

The grass beside the road was alight. The red and yellow flames were already licking in the air. A small tree caught fire, bursting into flame.

'Give me the mobile,' said Dad.

Here the drama lies in the battle between the people and the frightening situation. At other times, two people might be having a fight. All exciting stories have lots of drama.

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(C) DIALOGUE

Dialogue is the name for what people say to one another in a story. The word literally means 'between two' (the speakers).

'Where's my Mummy?'

The little girl was clutching a doll. She was crying as if her heart would break.

The lady had come out of the shop and was kneeling beside her.

'What's your name?'

'M-Mandy...'

'Where do you last see your mother, darling?'

'There!'

The little girl pointed to a shop across the shopping mall.

'And she's not there?'

'No...'

And the child burst into tears again.

You will notice that the words themselves are not 'fancy'. But they pack tremendous power - because they convey the feelings of the people in the recount. Never

underestimate the power of the words people use. It is a very easy way to add excitement.

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(D) DETAIL

Detail comes from what you can **see, hear, smell, touch** and **taste**. Sights are usually the most powerful, but the others are important too. Professional writers usually try to give you a sense of what the scene is - to help you visualise it. The same applies to recounts.

The first day at school can be a nightmare. The littlies are led in by their mothers. Their school bags are shiny and new. Their shoes are bright. Inside their bags are their brand new books and pencils, a carefully cut lunch and a special treat. Anything to soften the blow.

Because they are scared. Some are already crying. One is holding onto his mother, his arms around her knees. She is stroking his hair, whispering soothing words which he doesn't hear above the sound of his sobs. Others are flushed or white faced - their mouths open in amazement. The bigger kids stand around. Some jeer. Most just look on in silence, and remember with a shudder how it felt.

Here the details (bags, shoes, hats etc) are simple. But they draw our attention to the 'nuts and bolts' of this scene. **The rule is: all detail must tell us something.** The detail of the mother stroking the child's hair tells us she is comforting him. The detail of the older kids looking on in silence tells us that they are discomfited by their memories of the first day.

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How to finish a recount?

Every recount is different, but they should all end well. Here are some suggestions:

* What did you learn from the experience?

Undertows are deadly. Every summer people drown through carelessness.

* Did you change as a result of this experience - explain how in less than 10 words?

Getting lost in the shopping mall changed my life.

* Was there a 'moral' to the story?

People who light fires in summer are evil.

* What about a quote, which sums up the point of the story?

My Dad once said, thinking of his own school days: ‘School is unavoidable and necessary – but no one said it was all fun.’

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Summing up

A recount is a **personal story**.

Here are what it needs:

- It needs a beginning (exposition), a middle (development) and an end (conclusion)
- It should if possible develop to some kind of dramatic moment (a crisis or high point)
- It should use the traditional tricks of narrative writing: ‘diving in’, drama, dialogue and detail
- It should end strongly: with a summing up, a lesson, a ‘moral’ or a quote.