**Auxiliary Verbs**

Fiction is written, for the most part, in the simple past tense. This is a deeply ingrained convention, and although many experimental pieces are written in other tenses, they remain experimental. The past tense is convincing. The present tense produces a feeling surrealism, and the future tense, of course, is likely to be met with the skepticism that greets most acts of prophesy.

The simple past tense does not require auxiliary verbs (should, could, would, have, had, will have, would have, may, might, can, and so forth). Thus, auxiliary verbs sometimes indicate problems.

**Avoid the "habitual past"**

"Would" is an auxiliary verb that may indicate the author has slipped into what I call the "habitual past." There is also a "habitual present" although it is usually reserved for essays. The "habitual past" goes something like this:

Tuesdays were our regular banking days. Gramps would put on his best brown suit. He would brush out my hair and put a ribbon in it. He would take my hand and we would walk to the streetcar stop over on Elm Street.

Before we would catch the streetcar, Gramps would get a shine from Edward who had a stand outside of the soda fountain at Elm and Second Avenue. Edward would snap his polishing cloth as he put a shine on Gramps' shoes so it sounded like the crack of a bullwhip.

On one of these expeditions . . .

For some reason, new writers are overly fond of writing of habitual or recurring events. The reason this should be avoided is partly that these expression lack concreteness and partly that they lack precision. "Typical" events are less concrete than "actual" events, and "typical" events must be described imprecisely -- a typical trip to the bank has to gloss over the many little differences between the numerous actual trips. In the example, the author finally reveals that there is a point to this account. Something particularly interesting occurred on one of these of these expeditions. Thus, this anecdote should account for that particular trip to the bank:

Tuesday, our regular banking day, Gramps put on his best brown suit. He brushed out my hair and put a ribbon in it. He took my hand and we walked to the streetcar stop over on Elm Street.

Before the streetcar came, Gramps got a shine from Edward who had a stand outside of the soda fountain at Elm and Second Avenue. Edward snapped his polishing cloth as he polished Gramps' shoes so it sounded like the crack of a bullwhip.

On this expedition . . .

That the character and her grandfather went to the bank regularly is conveyed, if it is important, with the note that Tuesday was "our regular banking day." But the effect of the real trip is much strong than that of the typical one.

In a memoir collapsing details of several trips into one account would be dishonest, and it might be impractical to tell the story of several trips simply to relate a few variations. But in a work of fiction, one precise account can do the duty of a "typical" account.

**Auxiliary verbs can indicate the hypothetical**

"Should," "could," "might," and a few other auxiliaries indicate hypothetical expressions. For some reason people are much more interest in hear of what did happen than in what could have happened, what should have happened, or what might have happened.

What is more, many hypothetical expressions occur when characters are musing rather than doing anything. Rehashing the "what ifs" of situations and the "could haves," "should haves," and "would haves" is not the stuff of effective writing.

**Auxiliary verbs may indicate stories told out of order**

Stories are best told in chronological order: what happened first, what happened next, what happened after that. Told in that order stories naturally incorporate elements of suspense. Readers don't know what will happen next and they continue reading to find out.

Telling readers what "would become" of various characters cannot encourage readers to continue reading.

Of course, characters have histories. Things have happened before the story opens and sometimes it is necessary to refer to those things. In truth, although the author needs to know much about what happened before the story began, readers do not need to know so much of it as some authors think. In any event, when full-blown flash backs are called for, the flash back is told in the simple past tense once the time of the scene is established.

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