



## The Midnight Train Delay – Writing Exercise

This exercise pushes you to think about **how language shapes storytelling**.

By stepping into the voice of a specific character, you become more aware of how vocabulary, tone, and focus change depending on who is narrating.

A train ticket collector will describe the same event very differently from an opera singer or a conspiracy blogger. Practising this helps you sharpen your word choice, understand how perspective shapes narrative, and create characters whose voices feel authentic and distinct.

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In this writing exercise, we're going to explore three things that can completely change how a story is read: **character voice**, **genre conventions**, and **subtle clues**.

- **Character voice** – revealing personality, bias, and background through narration.
- **Genre conventions** – signalling genre through tone, vocabulary, pacing, and imagery.
- **Planting subtle clues** – letting the reader infer who the narrator is and what genre the scene belongs to without being told outright.

## The Challenge

### Mystery on the Midnight Train

*It is just past midnight. The long-distance train to Edinburgh has been running smoothly until now. The lights flicker, the brakes screech, and the train grinds to a halt in the middle of a dark, snow-covered landscape. The driver makes no announcement. Whispers spread through the carriage. Somewhere further along the train, a door slams.*

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Select a **Passenger Profile** and a **Genre Prompt** from the table below. (Pick a character and genre that wouldn't usually appear in your writing.)



Write a scene about the Midnight Train Delay from your passenger’s point of view, using the genre conventions you’ve been given, but don’t state who your passenger is or what genre you’re using. Let your reader figure it out from the clues you leave behind.

Character Type	Language / Vocabulary	Tone	Sentence Structure	Imagery & Focus
Retired Detective	Observational verbs: “noted,” “observed,” “calculated”; references to procedure	Measured, analytical	Short, precise sentences	Focus on physical evidence, behaviour patterns, timing
Old Person With Memory Issues	Uncertain phrasing, repetition, “I think,” “Was it...?”	Hesitant, wandering	Fragmented or trailing sentences	Focus on small details, gaps in recollection, confusion over sequence
Night-Shift Nurse	Medical terms, health-focused: “pulse,” “clammy,” “fatigue”	Calm under pressure	Even-paced, methodical sentences	Focus on people’s wellbeing, body language, signs of stress
Conspiracy Blogger	Paranoid phrasing: “obviously staged,” “they don’t want us to know”	Suspicious, urgent	Abrupt, emphatic sentences	Focus on “hidden” signals, unusual details, secrecy
Teenage Runaway	Slang, informal contractions, mistrust of adults	Defensive, guarded	Short, clipped, abrupt	Focus on exits, authority figures, own possessions
Local Who Has Come to See if They Can Help	Practical, direct language; questions about needs and resources	Helpful, concerned	Steady, straightforward sentences	Focus on people’s condition, practical problems, possible solutions
Train Ticket Collector	Formal, procedural language; references to tickets, regulations	Polite but authoritative	Clear, measured sentences	Focus on passenger movements, orderliness, and rules
Disgruntled Business Traveller	Corporate terms, time-focused language: “deadline,” “wasted hours”	Irritated, cynical	Direct, brisk sentences	Focus on schedules, productivity, inconvenience

Character Type	Language / Vocabulary	Tone	Sentence Structure	Imagery & Focus
Retired Train Engineer	Technical jargon, mechanical references	Instructive, mildly critical	Clear, methodical sentences	Focus on train systems, faults, and maintenance
Amateur Birdwatcher	Ornithological terms, nature-focused	Wonderstruck, observant	Flowing, detail-heavy sentences	Focus on wildlife, weather patterns, and movement
Opera Singer	Musical vocabulary, references to performance	Dramatic, expressive	Lyrical or rhythmic sentences	Focus on sound, acoustics, and personal presence
Someone Who Has Never Been On A Train	Naïve observations, curiosity about basic details	Awestruck, tentative	Short or disjointed sentences	Focus on novelty, small, unfamiliar objects, comparing to other experiences

Genre	Language / Vocabulary	Tone	Sentence Structure	Imagery & Atmosphere
Gothic Horror	Archaic or lyrical words: “shadow,” “echo,” “whisper”	Eerie, foreboding	Long, winding sentences	Darkness, weather, decaying beauty
Cozy Mystery	Gentle humour, community terms, domestic detail	Curious, light	Balanced, even rhythm	Familiar settings, small observations
Noir Crime	Slang, cynical similes, hard-boiled phrases	Gritty, world-weary	Short, punchy	Rain, smoke, shadows, neon
Romantic Comedy	Playful language, awkward descriptions	Light, humorous	Mixed pace (fast in dialogue, slower in reflection)	Everyday mishaps, blushing, accidental touches
Psychological Thriller	Uncertain, suspicious phrasing	Tense, claustrophobic	Short, fragmented	Tight focus on small details, shifts in mood
Fantasy	Magical, mythical references	Wonder, awe, or epic seriousness	Variable; can be lyrical	Otherworldly elements, nature, symbols
Spy Thriller	Codes, surveillance terms, covert language	Controlled, tense	Efficient, purposeful	Glances, signals, hidden compartments



Genre	Language / Vocabulary	Tone	Sentence Structure	Imagery & Atmosphere
<b>Absurdist Humour</b>	Ridiculous metaphors, playful nonsense	Irreverent, unpredictable	Disjointed or overly formal for comic effect	Odd juxtapositions, bizarre details
<b>Historical Fiction</b>	Period-accurate words, cultural detail	Immersive, authentic	Reflective or formal	Historical setting, textures, sounds
<b>Science Fiction</b>	Technical terms, speculative detail	Futuristic, analytical or adventurous	Precise or fast-paced	Technology, altered landscapes
<b>Surrealism</b>	Dreamlike phrases, illogical juxtapositions	Unsettling or whimsical	Shifts abruptly	Strange or impossible imagery
<b>Drama</b>	Emotional, vivid phrasing	Serious, empathetic	Varied	Strong sensory detail, focus on relationships

Now you have your character and genre selected, let's have a look at how to implement the three objectives.

## Character Voice Clues

Think about:

**What they notice first** — safety hazards, clothing, exits, food, other people's moods?

**What vocabulary they use** — technical terms, slang, formal language, poetic phrasing?

**Tone** — are they confident, anxious, sarcastic, romantic, detached?

**Bias** — do they admire authority, distrust strangers, see beauty in small things, assume the worst?

**Examples:**

*Detective:* "The conductor's eyes flicked left before he answered — a lie, then."

*Nurse:* "It's too warm in here. Someone's going to faint if they don't get those windows open."

## Genre Conventions

Every genre has certain rules, rhythms, and expectations.



- In **Gothic horror**, you might lean into atmosphere: flickering lights, strange creaks, an unnatural silence.
- In a **spy thriller**, you'd focus on coded messages, suspicious behaviour, and heightened paranoia.
- In **romantic comedy**, you'd zero in on awkward glances, clumsy moments, and humour in the chaos.

## Planting Subtle Clues

This is where you trust your audience to be active. You drop hints, and they connect the dots.

A clue could be:

- **A profession hinted at by what the character notices** ('the load on the axle felt uneven' might hint at someone with mechanical experience).
- **A bias revealed in word choice** ('the corporate types were already fidgeting' tells you something about how they see others).
- **A genre hint hidden in imagery** ('the snow fell like ash' leans toward a bleak, dystopian mood).

## An Example

\*Read the snippet below and from the list of characters and genres, see if you can guess who the character is and what genre this is.\*

The sky beyond the frosted carriage window was a seamless black dome scattered with cold, distant stars, yet my gaze kept scanning for wingbeats. Old habits. But what I saw gliding in the upper atmosphere was nothing I had ever charted. They moved without wings, each encased in a faint blue corona that shimmered like electric lightning through my frosted lenses. I eased my binoculars from their case, feigning an idle adjustment so the man across the aisle would not notice. The last thing I needed was someone dismissing me as a conspiracy theorist. Through the optics, the shapes came into impossible focus; sleek, symmetrical forms banking in precise arcs, as though performing some unearthly migration.

A deep vibration trembled through the carriage floor. It was not the steady hum of an engine. This rhythm was irregular, almost organic. Around me, the other passengers grumbled about signal failures, about a frozen line, about being stranded. But I had seen the moment the carriage lights faltered, just before the glowing shapes descended, their luminescence so strong it stripped the clouds away like morning mist. No living bird could dissolve a sky. My fingers tightened on the binoculars. These were no birds, and whatever they were, they did not belong to any list I had ever kept.

\*\*\* **For the answer, see the bottom of the PDF.**\*\*\*

Did you guess correctly?

Now, go back and highlight the words and descriptions that support the character identification and genre indications.

Consider the character and genre you have selected and think about how this can affect your language and structure choices.

## Writing Tips

- A detective doesn't care about romance; a romantic lead might not care about technical details.
- Let tone guide the reader. Light tone suggests comedy or cosiness; heavy, oppressive tone hints at horror or thriller.
- Use sentence length as a tool. Quick, staccato sentences increase tension; long, flowing sentences slow the pace and build atmosphere.
- Layer subtle clues. One or two hints won't give it away, but together they'll guide the guesser.

## Let Your Imagination Run Wild

\* Amateur Birdwatcher – Science Fiction

