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A Sequence of Events

You do this all the time. You recount something that happened to you. You tell a friend about a movie. Or maybe in school you have to retell part of a story you read. Sometimes you even have to write down the steps you used to solve a problem in math. All of these things are the same in one important way because they all involve describing a sequence of events.

When you describe something as a sequence of events, you can use the same basic structure every time. That structure has three parts:

- **Transitions.** These are short phrases like “Then” or “After a while” or “In the beginning” that help to introduce each new action in the sequence. You don’t have to have a transition for each action, but they can be very helpful at making your sequence flow smoothly.
- **Actions.** These are the actual events (the things that happened) listed in the order in which they occurred.
- **Details.** This is additional information about each action. For each action, your audience will probably have two or three important questions you need to answer. These answers are your details.

The Transition-Action-Details strategy is very useful. Opportunities to describe a sequence of events come up all the time in school: in narrative fiction and non-fiction writing, in plot summaries for reading, in the steps of solving a math problem, in social studies when you recount an historical event, in science when you study chemical processes, and so on.

When filling out the Transition-Action-Details chart, start in the “Action” column first. Fill in the first box with the first thing that happens. Then, go to the last “Action” box and write the end. Now, fill in everything in between. When you finish the “Action” column, add a couple of details for each action. Finally, come up with simple phrases in the “Transition” column that introduce each action.

Transition-Action-Details

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
<i>(Introduce the action)</i>	<i>(Describe what happened)</i>	<i>(Answer audience questions)</i>

Example

TRANSITION

ACTION

DETAILS

Last summer,	I went on vacation with my family to the ocean.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We go almost every year. • It's fun because there's a lot to do. • I get to do a lot of exploring with my dog.
On the third day,	I was walking with my dog along a cliff overlooking the beach below.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We were about 75 feet up from the beach. • We were on a path with trees and brush and big piles of rocks by the edge.
As we got up to the highest point on the cliff,	We saw a small animal scurry under some rocks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It startled me at first but then I realized that it was probably more afraid of us than we were of it. • I just kept on walking.
All of a sudden,	My dog ran after the animal and jumped over the rocks to try to get it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He likes to chase things. • I was amazed at how fast he ran. • He got close to the rocks but didn't stop. He just went right over.
[No Transition]	I ran after him, looked over the edge of the cliff, and found him clinging to some brush hanging by his paws.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was so scared. • I thought he'd gone over the cliff and had fallen all the way down. • He looked scared, too.
At first I didn't know what to do. Then,	I tried to reach over the rocks to pull him up.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I grabbed a piece of the branch and pulled him up with it. • I just kept telling him to hold on and not move. • I could tell that he was just as scared as I was.

Expanding the Moment

A great technique. Sometimes, a part of a story is so good, we want to stretch it out and make it last a little longer. Here I'm using the Transition-Action-Details strategy to make one part of the dog story (the part when the dog runs off the cliff) take up more time. It's as though I'm taking one moment out of the story and expanding it into several smaller moments. This slows down the pace just at the point where I want the audience to pay more attention.

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
When I heard my dog start after the animal,	I immediately stopped and turned around to watch him.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He doesn't usually just run off like that. • I was surprised and a little scared.
As soon as I saw where he was headed,	I called out to him to get him to stop.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He didn't seem to notice. He just kept on going. • I had a feeling something bad was going to happen.
For the next few moments,	I froze.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I wanted to do something but I didn't know what. • It seemed like it was happening in slow motion.
[No Transition]	He started to run up the rocks just as fast as he could.	When he got to the top, I could tell he was trying to stop but he was going so fast that he couldn't.
As I saw him going over the edge,	I screamed his name again and started running after him.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As I got to the edge of the cliff, I was afraid to look over. • He was caught in a branch. • He was dangling there 75 feet above the rocks and the water. • I was happy to see him and terrified at the same time.

T-A-D in World History

TRANSITION

ACTION

DETAILS

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed at the end of World War I,	Great Britain ended up administering Palestine.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • League of Nations' Mandate System. • League Covenant Article 22.
In 1917, at the urging of Zionist groups in England,	The British issued the Balfour Declaration.	The declaration expressed support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."
During the years of the Mandate, 1922-1947,	Many Jews immigrated to Palestine.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly from Eastern Europe. • Fleeing Nazi persecution in the 1930s.
In 1947,	The UN proposed splitting Palestine into two states.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One state for Palestinian Arabs, the other for Jews. • Jerusalem would be internationalized. • Resolution 181 of 1947.
In 1948,	Israel declared its independence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Israel was attacked by Arab nations. • They won the war and claimed more than 75% of the land in Palestine. • Half the population of Palestinians left or were thrown out.
In 1967, as a result of the Six Day War,	Israel came to occupy the remaining territory of Palestine.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The West Bank was formerly under Jordanian control. • The Gaza Strip was controlled by Egypt.

T-A-D in the History of Science

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
In the 1770s,	Joseph Priestley, in England, performed experiments showing that plants release a type of air that allows combustion.	He burned a candle in a closed jar until the flame went out. He put a leaf in the jar and after several days showed that the candle could burn again.
Although Priestley did not know all the implications of his discovery,	His work showed that plants release oxygen into the atmosphere.	Even today, scientists are still investigating the mechanisms by which plants produce oxygen.
Building on Priestley's work,	A Dutch doctor named Jan Ingenhousz proved that sunlight was necessary for photosynthesis and that only the green parts of plants could release oxygen.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the same time, Jean Senebier, in Switzerland, discovered that CO_2 is required. • Nicolas-Théodore de Saussure, a Swiss chemist, showed that water is required.
In 1845,	Julius Robert von Mayer, a German physician, proposed that photosynthetic organisms convert light energy into chemical free energy.	This was a final piece of the puzzle that led to the modern understanding of photosynthesis.
By the middle of the nineteenth century,	The key feature of photosynthesis was understood: that plants use light energy to make carbohydrates from CO_2 and water.	Because glucose, a six carbon sugar, is often an intermediate product of photosynthesis, the equation of photosynthesis is frequently written as: $6\text{CO}_2 + 12\text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{Light Energy} \longrightarrow \text{C}_6\text{H}_{12}\text{O}_6 + 6\text{O}_2 + 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$

T-A-D and a Scientific Process

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
When light enters the eye,	It hits the cornea first.	It passes through the cornea, then the aqueous humor, the lens, and the vitreous humor.
Eventually,	The light reaches the retina, the light-sensing part of the eye.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The retina has rods and cones. • Rods handle vision in low light. • Cones handle color vision and detail.
When light contacts these two types of cells,	A series of complex chemical reactions occurs.	A chemical called Rhodopsin creates electrical impulses in the optic nerve.
When it is exposed to light,	Rhodopsin decomposes.	Light causes a physical change in part of the chemical.
In an extremely fast reaction, beginning in a few trillionths of a second,	Rhodopsin breaks down and eventually forms Metarhodopsin.	This chemical causes electrical impulses that are transmitted to the brain and interpreted as light.

T-A-D and Math Problem Solving

Orange Juice Birthday

On a sweltering Saturday in August, Mr. Cal Q. Luss trudged into his local Friendly Mart to get orange juice for his son's birthday party. For last year's party he had purchased three gallons, more than enough, or so he thought, to slake the monster thirsts of his son's 23 classmates. But Eddie Guzzle drank almost an entire gallon by himself, and poor Elaine Dryer fainted from dehydration after Pin the Tail on the Donkey.

As he entered the store, a blast of air-conditioned coolness reminded him of the temperature outside. It was a scorcher: you could fry eggs on the sidewalk and still have heat left over for a side a bacon and a couple of flap-jacks. Mr. Luss vowed that this year he wouldn't be calling little Lainie's mom to pick her daughter up at the Emergency Room. Better make it four gallons.

Proceeding quickly to the juice section, Mr. Luss found himself at a loss when he discovered that all of the large carton juice containers were sold out. He would have to purchase 12-ounce cans of juice instead, but he couldn't figure out how many to get. Extremely frustrated, and behind on time, he knocked the entire display of juice cans into his shopping cart and dashed briskly to the checkout. When he got home, he discovered he had purchased 42 cans of juice. Did he get the four gallons that he needed, or will some thirsty 9-year old be fainting in the fierce mid-day summer sun?

TRANSITION

ACTION

DETAILS

First,	I remembered how many ounces there are in a gallon.	1 Gallon = 128 ounces
Next,	I multiplied this by 4 to get the amount of juice he needed to get.	$4 \times 128 =$ $4 \times 100 = 400 +$ $4 \times 20 = 80 +$ $4 \times 8 = 32$ $400 + 80 + 32 = 512 \text{ ounces}$
Then,	I figured out how much juice he bought by multiplying the number of cans times 12 ounces.	$42 \times 12 =$ $42 \times 10 = 420$ $42 \times 2 = 84$ $420 + 84 = 504 \text{ ounces}$
Finally,	I subtracted the amount he bought from the amount he needed.	$512 - 504 = 8$ He was 8 ounces short.

Tips on Transition-Action-Details

Testing out your sequencing. The thing I like best about this strategy is that it lets me test out my story little by little so I can make sure it's right. I start by filling in the first and last "Action" boxes. This way I know for sure how I want my story to start and end. Then I fill in the boxes in the middle. Finally, I read it over from top to bottom to make sure that things are in the right order and that I haven't left anything out. At this point, it's easy to make a change if I have to switch something around, add in something new, or take something out. Once the "Action" column is good, I feel confident that the rest of the story will work out well, too.

Filling in the details. This is just like filling in the details of an Idea-Details chart. You use the same approach, too. Look at your "Action" and then think about the questions your audience would ask you about it. Or, if you like, share your writing with the class or with a partner and see what questions people ask you. The difference between the "Details" column in this strategy and the "Details" column in Idea-Details is that you don't need as many details for things to work out. Try to come up with two or three really good details for each action. That will usually be plenty.

Don't worry about the transitions. If you can't think of any transitions, or if you feel you don't need them, leave those boxes blank. First of all, not every action needs to be introduced with a transition. Second, when you start to draft, you'll probably put some transitions in naturally without thinking about it. There are only two things you have to watch out for: **(1)** *Using the same transition over and over* — that's boring. And **(2)** *Using too many of those traditional "school" transitions like "First of all," "In conclusion," "As you can see," and so on.* These transitions aren't wrong, they just sound a little strange because they're not the normal transitions most people use when they write authentically. In truth, the best writing uses no transitional phrases at all. Instead, the writer uses logic to move the reader from one action to the next.

The right number of actions. How many actions do you need? That's impossible to say. At a minimum, you would have to have three in order to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. There's nothing stopping you from having a hundred if you want. But most of us can only keep track of seven or so. If you have more than seven or eight actions, your story might begin to feel as though it's a bit long or too complicated. See if you can combine several actions into one. Remember, you can always expand any action into several actions at a later time (and on another chart) by using the "expand the moment" technique.

Working with the chart. If you have more actions in your story than there are rows on the chart, get another piece of paper and continue. If there are more rows on the chart than you have actions in your story, leave the ones you don't use blank. If you'd like to create extra rows on the same page, draw a horizontal line across the chart and split any single row into two. Use the chart in whatever way makes sense to you. There's no one right way to do it. Better yet, draw your own Transition-Action-Details chart on your own paper.