

# Reverse Chronology: how & why to write backwards

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<http://greatstorybook.com/reverse-chronology-write-backwards/>

This entry is part 5 of 5 in the series [PLOT writing](#)

[PLOT writing](#)

- [How to begin a story to hook readers, editors and agents](#)
- [How to Write Rising Action in Act II](#)
- [How to Write a Great Ending](#)
- [Write an Awesome Inciting Incident: 3 things to do](#)
- Reverse Chronology: how & why to write backwards

**Reverse Chronology is literally when a story is told backwards, against the linear grain.**

**This is one of the most rare plot structures, but it's been around at least since the 1st Century BC.**

**Interesting, yes. But would you want to ever use this plot structure? YES!**

**Playing around with plot structure is an inventive way to make the telling of a story more playful, or more impactful. I've been asked recently to give tips on playing with plot structure, so here we go!**

**What you'll get here:**

- Comparison of a linear plot graph to a reverse chronology story.
- 3 things that distinguish a reverse chronology.
- How using a reverse chronology impacts your story and readers.
- Fantastic example of a reverse chronology storybook, with lesson plans.
- 3 things a reverse chronology isn't.

## Chronology vs. Reverse Chronology

You might wonder if reversing the plot order (where the first scene is The End and the last scene is how the whole thing started) alters the general plot – meaning, does the changed sequence of events also flip

around so that the [Rising Action](#) is replaced with Falling Action?

No, it doesn't. That's the really interesting thing about story. Even if the story is told backwards, we are still experiencing it in the way we would any other kind of chronological story. But there are specific and hard differences in the way a chronological (or mostly chronological plot, should it have flashbacks, etc.) and a reverse chronological story affect the story.

What's different is that the plot is heightened. It starts at a higher place (with a shocking and unexpected event, right away and without establishing character first) and runs through like that all the way to the end. In a reverse chronology, character is revealed with the action. There are no introductions. We jump in at the end.

### 3 Essential Differences

#### 1. We're not dealing with "and so" transitions here.

This is the most technically jarring difference (for the writer) between chronological and reverse chronological stories. **In a chronological plot, each scene is linked with, "and so" – that's how we traditionally think of this. In a reverse chronology, those scenes are all linked with, "and because."**

#### 2. The focus is on why and how, not what.

We know the "end" of a reverse chronology right away, so that means one thing: the ending isn't as important as the rest of the story. In other words, it's about the journey, not the destination.

While you can say this is true of most stories, it's magnified to the nth in a reverse chronology. As readers, we are continuously pushed and inspired to wonder how and why something could be happening.

#### 3. We often don't know who to root for - at all!

We're also left quite uncertain about how to feel, because we don't have the context. Are the characters Rebels or Freedom Fighters? Who are the good guys? In a reverse chronology, we might not know.

By keeping the origins and context of a story mysterious to us (at least, until the end - which is the beginning), our minds are forced to deal with questions we otherwise wouldn't have at all. In a standard chronological tale, we would typically know how the primary characters got to where they are and why, but not in a reverse chronology.

### When to consider using Reverse Chronology:

- When you want to build a sense of drama or slapstick comedy. &/or
- When you want to build a sense of mystery. &/or
- When you want to build a sense of poignancy. &/or
- When you want to write a philosophical drama or a morality tale. &/or
- When you want the reader to be thinking a lot about why and how.

## Has Reverse Chronology ever been used in a children's book?

**Yes!** You bet. Read [The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate the Wash](#) (1992), written by [Trinka Hakes Noble](#) and illustrated by [Steven Kellogg](#). This is a terrific storybook that gets kids giggling a lot. A little girl returns home after a school outing, and as her mom prods for more information about what happened, the girl explains more and more of the story... bit by bit, in reverse.

So Noble uses a reverse chronology within a frame story.

- The frame story: the girl comes home and tells her mom the story of what happened that day.
- The reverse chronology story: what crazy things happened that day, backwards (a.k.a. story within a story).

If you're looking for ways to offer helpful (and desired!) [teaching lessons that accompany a book](#), [CHECK HERE](#). This is a thorough 5-day lesson plan using [The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate the Wash](#).

## 3 things Reverse Chronology isn't.

- It isn't nonlinear narrative.
- It isn't *In media res*.
- It doesn't have to be all flashbacks.

It's different from a *nonlinear narrative* where flashbacks and flash forwards toss us all about. It also isn't an *In media res*, which is about starting the story right in the thick of the action (at an important turning point, or perhaps right after an important event).

**Reverse Chronology must start from the end and work backwards from that – linearly, but from Z to A instead of A to Z.**

In this way, most reverse chronology stories are told as a series of flashbacks, ones that go further and further into history, essentially.

### **Does a reverse chronology story *have* to be told in flashback?**

No. Because we're so accustomed to the idea of time travel and hypothetical thinking, it's quite possible to write a backwards-running story entirely in the present tense. It would be a challenge, but absolutely possible.

## **Be playful. Have purpose.**

Stories are structured (or should be) to move us, to inspire us. There are all sorts of ways we as storytellers can play with the [traditional story structure](#) to deliver a story that stands out and reaches people in a special way.

What about you? Have you ever played around with reverse chronology? If you haven't, I invite you to

write a little something below!

**Keep creating, no matter what.**

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