



Using Flashbacks to Make the Meaning Clear to Your Readers

EXAMPLE: Based on an Excerpt from *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson
by Kemlo Aki

The following example was reverse-engineered from the first few paragraphs in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson. Please note that the "stripped-down" versions below—with and without editorial feedback—were NOT written by Larsson nor endorsed by Larsson. We are merely using his excellent work as a teaching tool, and our stripped-down version is only meant to show how a writer MIGHT get from there to a final, polished draft.

Stripped Down Version (minimal thoughts, emotions or backstory)—"The What"

The trial was over. The written verdict was handed down at 10:00 on Friday morning, and all that remained was a summing up from the reporters waiting in the corridor outside the district court.

"Carl" Mikael Blomkvist saw them through the doorway and slowed his step. He straightened up and tried to smile. The reporters greeted him.

"Let's see . . . Aftonbladet, Expressen, TT Wire service, TV4, and . . . where are you from? . . . ah yes, Dagens Nyheter. I must be a celebrity," Blomkvist said.

"Give us a sound bite, Kalle Blomkvist." It was a reporter from one of the evening papers. Blomkvist forced himself not to roll his eyes. He detested the nickname.

Stripped Down Version with Editor's Feedback

[The trial was over.] The written verdict was handed down at 10:00 on Friday morning, and all that remained was a summing up from the reporters waiting in the corridor outside the district court.

["Carl" Mikael Blomkvist] saw them through the doorway and slowed his step. [He] straightened up and tried to smile. [The reporters greeted him.]

"Let's see . . . Aftonbladet, Expressen, TT Wire service, TV4, and . . . where are you from? . . . ah yes, Dagens Nyheter. I must be a celebrity," Blomkvist said.

"Give us a sound bite, Kalle Blomkvist." It was a reporter from one of the evening papers. [Blomkvist forced himself not to roll his eyes. He detested the nickname.]

Kemlo - 7/18/2016 12:31 PM

Comment [1]: What trial? Why does it matter to this character? What's his connection to it?

Kemlo - 7/18/2016 12:33 PM

Comment [2]: Who is he (specifically, in terms of the story—for example, what role has he played in the trial)?

Kemlo - 7/18/2016 12:33 PM

Comment [3]: Why? What was making it hard for him to smile, and why did he feel it was necessary in this situation?

Kemlo - 7/18/2016 12:37 PM

Comment [4]: Why him? (see #2 above)

Kemlo - 7/18/2016 12:35 PM

Comment [5]: Why? What makes "Kalle" a nickname he detests?



Original, Published Text (from Ch I of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson)

Yellow highlighting marks the text that was removed to create the stripped-down version. Note how the author has used the character's backstory, emotion and thoughts throughout.

The trial was irretrievably over; everything that could be said had been said, but he had never doubted that he would lose. The written verdict was handed down at 10:00 on Friday morning, and all that remained was a summing up from the reporters waiting in the corridor outside the district court.

"Carl" Mikael Blomkvist saw them through the doorway and slowed his step. He had no wish to discuss the verdict, but the questions were unavoidable, and he—of all people—knew that they had to be asked and answered. This is how it is to be a criminal, he thought. On the other side of the microphone. He straightened up and tried to smile. The reporters gave him friendly, almost embarrassed, greetings.

"Let's see . . . Aftonbladet, Expressen, TT Wire service, TV4, and . . . where are you from? . . . ah yes, Dagens Nyheter. I must be a celebrity," Blomkvist said.

"Give us a sound bite, Kalle Blomkvist." It was a reporter from one of the evening papers.

Blomkvist, hearing the nickname, forced himself as always not to roll his eyes. Once when he was twenty-three and had just started his first summer job as a journalist, Blomkvist had chanced upon a gang which had pulled off five bank robberies over the past two years. There was no doubt that it was the same gang in every instance. Their trademark was to hold up two banks at a time with military precision. They wore masks from Disney World, so inevitably police logic dubbed them the Donald Duck Gang. The newspapers renamed them the Bear Gang, which sounded more sinister, more appropriate to the fact that on two occasions they had recklessly fired warning shots and threatened curious passersby.

Their sixth outing was at a bank in Ostergotland at the height of the holiday season. A reporter from the local radio station happened to be in the bank at the time. As soon as the robbers were gone he went to a public telephone and dictated his story for live broadcast.

Blomkvist was spending several days with a girlfriend at her parents' summer cabin near Katrineholm. Exactly why he made the connection he could not explain, even to the police, but as he was listening to the news report he remembered a group of four men in a summer cabin a few hundred feet down the road. He had seen them playing badminton out in the yard: four blond, athletic types in shorts with their shirts off. They were obviously bodybuilders, and there had been something about them that had made him look twice—maybe it was because the game was being played in blazing sunshine with what he recognised as intensely focused energy.

There had been no good reason to suspect them of being the bank robbers, but nevertheless he had gone to a hill overlooking their cabin. It seemed empty. It was about forty minutes before a volvo drove up and parked in the yard. The young men got out, in a hurry, and were carrying a sports bag, so they might have been doing nothing more than coming back from a swim. But one of them returned to the car and took out from the boot something which he hurriedly covered with his jacket. Even from Blomkvist's relatively distant observation post he could tell that it was good old AK4, the rifle that had been his constant companion for the year of his military service.



He called the police and that was the start of a three-day siege of the cabin, blanket coverage by the media, with Blomkvist in a front-row seat and collecting a gratifyingly large fee from an evening paper. The police set up their headquarters in a caravan in the garden of the cabin where Blomkvist was staying.

The fall of the Bear Gang gave him the star billing that launched him as a young journalist. The downside of his celebrity was that the other evening newspaper could not resist using the headline "Kalle Blomkvist solves the case." The tongue-in-cheek story was written by an older female columnist and contained references to a the young detective in Astrid Lindgren's books for children. To make matters worse, the paper had run the story with a grainy photograph of Blomkvist with his mouth half open even as he raised an index finger to point.

It made no difference that Blomkvist had never in life used the name Carl. From that moment on, to his dismay, he was nicknamed Kalle Blomkvist by his peers—an epithet employed with taunting provocation, not unfriendly but not really friendly either. In spite of his respect for Astrid Lindgren—whose books he loved—he detested the nickname. It took him several years and far weightier journalistic successes before the nickname began to fade, but he still cringed if ever the name was used in his hearing.