

Flashbacks: some guidelines

1. Avoid them, mostly. Novelists can get by with quite a few; short story writers need to keep the number of flashbacks quite low.
2. When a flashback is necessary, keep it short.
3. Strive to show as much as you can in a flashback rather than telling.
4. Do not write the entire flashback in the past perfect tense:

He **had been** in only one fight. When the boxer **had attacked** him, Joel **had ducked** several blows, then he **had tried** a tentative swing with his right, but his fist **had not connected** with anything. He **had tried** a few kicks before the boxer **had knocked** him out.

For a story written in simple past tense, the past perfect is the logical tense for a flashback. After all, the past action **had** happened before the actions in the simple past tense narrative. But a long passage in the past perfect tense is tedious and calls too much attention to itself.

The solution? Enter a flashback with one past perfect tense to signal you are going into a flashback, then write the flashback in the simple past. Signal the reader that you are returning to the main time sequence of events with another single past perfect in the last sentence of the flashback.

Thus the above sample flashback would be written:

He **had been** in only one fight. When the boxer attacked him, Joel ducked several blows, then he tried a tentative swing with his right, but his fist connected with nothing. He tried a few kicks before the boxer **had knocked** him out.

5. For a backflash that is a long scene, use the past perfect signal to get in and to get out, and give your reader other clues that you are exiting the backflash. You might, for example, refer to something in the point of view character's setting before entering the flashback, then refer again to it in the sentence after the one that closes the flashback.