Flashbacks and Flashforwards

Some stories need to jump around in time a bit. Sometimes a writer has to go back in time a little to help make sense of what’s happening in the story. In movies and television shows, this is easy to do. Show the character thinking, then misty foggy transition, and a sepia filter later, and we’re back to when little Bobby was just a boy. In stories, this can be a lot more difficult. Here are some guidelines to help you out:

1. **Beware**—This technique can greatly interrupt the story. It can be jarring and annoying if a character is always thinking about the good old days. Therefore, you should ONLY do this technique when it is absolutely necessary. And it can be necessary. No one likes all the history of a person told in short descriptive sentences. Flashbacks can be necessary, but beware in using them. Save them for the important stuff.

2. **Time them just right**—You can’t start a scene with a flashback and later say, “Oh by the way, this happened in the past. Gotcha.” That makes the reader confused and angry. You have to build up to a flashback much like you have to build up to riding a bike for the first time. . . I remember when I learned to ride a bike. . . Sorry, I got distracted. Set the scene, get things moving, THEN move into the flashback/flashforward.

3. **Give a warning**—Readers like clues as to what you are going to do. They don’t like to be on the outside, totally oblivious to what will happen next. They are part of the team. It is your responsibility to warn the reader that a flash in time is coming with the way you frame your narrative. Like this...

   Mrs. Barney strolled down the street at a nice casual pace. No need to alarm anyone of the danger to come. Her eyes darted back and forth, stopping on a family playing in their yard. The father ran after a boy, pedaling a bike that seemed to be twice his size. His feet flew and his eyes cringed with deep concentration. He must have just been learning. She remembered the first time she learned to ride. It was a bright, Arizona day when she was just five, and her sister yelled impatiently...

   I think you get the point. Give a warning.

4. **Verb tense**—One trick is to use a switch in verb tense to set up the flashback. This does not always work, but if your whole story is in present tense, a quick shift to past tense will alert the reader that this has already happened.

Flashbacks and flashforwards can be an interesting way to tell a story, but be sure to heed my advice, lest you confuse and anger the reader. No one likes a cranky audience.