The Five Narrative Modes

Writers use five different narrative modes to tell a story. Some writers rely heavily upon only one or a few of the narrative modes while other writers intermix all of the modes equally. This varying use of the modes not only contributes to the writer’s particular style, but also aids the writer in crafting the story. Often, the meaning (or any of the other elements) would change drastically if the narrative modes employed were to change.

Dialogue and Thought
Dialogue and thought serve three purposes: first, they reveal something about the character. Second, they build tension. Third, they help advance the story. The difference between the two is that dialogue is spoken aloud, while thought is internal monologue. Often, the two can play off each other to create interesting effects.

For example:
“The Indian world is on a collision course with the white world,” Billy said. Wasn’t that the truth, Horse thought.

Action
Action is where things happen in the story. However, action is not necessarily explosive. It can also be very subtle. Action is used not only to move the story forward but also to reveal information about the characters.

For example: Nola didn’t look back at the drenched, angry matron standing at the edge of the schoolyard with her hands on her hips. Will turned on the wipers. He took off his expensive wet hat, threw it in the back, and drove Nola away in the rainstorm, imagining the taste of the rain on her skin.

In this passage the action not only moves the plot of the story forward, but also reveals something about the personalities of the three characters involved. In addition, the modes are often used together in the same passage, or even in the same sentence (as dialogue and thought often are). In this passage Will’s actions and thought are blended in the same sentence to give the reader an indication of where the plot is going and also to give us some insight into Will’s character.

Description
The way that a writer uses description will very heavily influence their tone and style. Some writers use sparse descriptions of characters, settings, and so forth, while other writers go into more detail or have a particular approach to description that heavily influences the story. Description tends to encompass elements like setting, tone, imagery, and characterization, so if you are going to talk or write about description you will probably want to figure out what specific kind of description it is. Generally, description is used to illicit emotional responses from the reader.
For example:
Tornado Nola, as it came to be called, was a favorite topic in Indian Territory. The twister had touched down only in select locations. It destroyed the Catholic church, but if left the Baptist church untouched. The most devout of both faiths concluded it was God’s will they attend the Baptist church.

**Exposition**
Exposition refers to the details the narrator gives about a character. This can be sometimes a flashback or flash-forward, or just a piece of background information or commentary. The problem with exposition is that readers like to draw their own conclusions about the characters, and exposition, because of its very nature, forces the writer to tell readers information, rather than showing it to the reader.

For example:
Unlike her mother, however, she had Catholic leanings and placed anemic looking statues of saints, Jesus, and the blond virgin Mary throughout the rooms. She burned candles at the feet of the statues. And her monkey wore a rhinestone collar.