

# Narrative Structure

## What is a narrative structure?

A narrative structure or, what can also be called the story-form, organizes facts, ideas, concepts, etc. in a coherent and emotionally engaging way. In discussion of the tools of oral language and the imaginative dimensions of Mythic understanding, we identify the story as crucial in early learning; it is the tool that enables us to bring curriculum content and emotion together to make knowledge more fully meaningful to the student. That remains largely true for older students, but the kind of story that engages them is different from the basic story structures more common in early years. The term *narrative* is now used to refer to the story-form shaped by the emotional and imaginative features of literacy.

A narrative is a continuous account of a series of events or facts that shapes them into an emotionally satisfactory whole. It has in common with a story that shaping of emotion, and so the words are often used synonymously, but it is different in that narratives can be less precisely tied into a tight story, less concerned with emotion, more varied, more open, more complex. That is, the term *narrative* is used to indicate the greater variety and openness of the stories that prove most useful as students become fluently literate. Like story, narrative preserves the importance of shaping events and facts to affect emotions.

## How can we evoke a narrative structure in teaching?

**Topic:** Ancient Civilizations (The Roman Empire)

**Subject Area:** Social Studies

**Cognitive Tool:** Narrative Structuring

What's the story on the small Roman state that, at one point, dominated vast areas of the world? A narrative on the rise and fall of the Roman Empire can be one focused largely on human ambition. Deceit and murder were no strangers to the drama of Roman leadership. One part of the narrative, then, would focus on the nature of the ambition demonstrated by emperors of Rome. One might also look at the army. The Roman army was also a major contributor to the building of the empire. How is military might an example of ambition? Of course, ambition can have positive and negative effects. It is generally noted, for example, that Rome suffered from an entire list of problems. These included: a series of emperors whose military leaders sought to overthrow them (some emperors had military leaders killed thereby weakening leadership in their armies), endless infighting, weakening Roman unity (by the end Rome had two capitals, Rome and Constantinople, each with its own emperor), economic problems (Rome was spending far more than it could afford and by the end didn't have enough gold or silver to make its own coins), mass migration, and plagues (illness decimated the Roman population). By addressing the reasons behind the rise and fall of Rome in terms of ambition our students will encounter the extremes of ambition, its pros and cons, and the human source

of this great empire. At what point did the desire for power of Rome as a whole, not to mention individual Romans, lead to its demise? Such questions can be resolved in vivid narratives.

**Topic:** Ancient Civilizations (Ancient Egypt)

**Subject Area:** Social Studies

**Cognitive Tool:** Narrative Structuring

Narrative structuring might invite students to travel back in time to explore ancient Egyptian society. They will be traveling as scientists, explorers, and adventurers. They could be “given” new (imaginary) technology that will transplant them for brief periods of time into the bodies of the people they will be studying. Until they arrive in the bodies they will have no idea of who or what role they will have in Ancient Egypt, nor which one of the particular twenty-five dynasties that made up Ancient Egyptian civilization. To make things interesting students might be told that they will be traveling back in time with no support other than their own wits and training. It will be made clear to them that there is a risk they may not come back, or that if they reveal that they are from the future, they could destroy their “temporary hosts”, or change society and their own future.

Our story might be shaped as follows: First, two scientists, friends of the classroom teacher visit the students in their classroom with an unusual proposition. They have discovered new technology that will allow people to travel back in time and temporarily inhabit the minds of Ancient inhabitants. The technology is not without its problems, however. The neural synaptic impulses of adult brains are too inflexible and adults tend to become permanently trapped in the past. Archimedes and Leonardo da Vinci are referred to as two scientists who went back in time and then were trapped in the past because their cerebral cortex’s weren’t flexible enough to jump back to the future. This means that only adolescents can safely travel back to the past and return to the future. Second, the technology will transport students back to Ancient Egypt but the specific time and date are unknown. It will be the students’ responsibility to determine where and when they are. There are clues that students can use to determine where and when they are in the Egyptian past. Third, in traveling back to the past and temporarily inhabiting a host, the students may only go as observers. They must be very careful that they fit in and exhibit no behaviour that people might find unusual or odd. For this, they must complete a temporary program of training that will give them the background information they need to function.

**Topic:** The Water Cycle

**Subject Area:** Science

**Cognitive Tool:** Narrative Structuring

This narrative structure is based on an image that captures the wonder of the water cycle. I imagined the most exotic or extreme places that the water could have come from. I visualized the polar ice caps, slime covered lakes, the insides of a blue whale or even a family pet. Where has the water you drank this morning come from? Perhaps the same water molecule that you just sipped from a glass was once lapped up from a stream by a dinosaur... Or perhaps a short

time ago it was swirling in someone's toilet bowl! Or, again, that water we drink today might have been a tear of Cleopatra's at one time. As water molecules, my students were to set off on their own heroic journey to new and exotic (and also just plain gross) locations where they, as water molecules, could bravely venture into the unknown (to borrow from the Star Trek Series): *Water, the final frontier. These are the voyages of H2O. Its continuing mission: To explore strange new places. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no one has gone before.*

### **Why does a narrative structure engage our imaginations?**

Brian Sutton-Smith wrote, "The mind is . . . a narrative concern" (1988, p. 22). This is a view that is becoming increasingly widely accepted. Jerome Bruner has also elaborated a view of the mind as involving a crucial narrative dimension (1986). The older view of the mind as an elaborate calculating organ with reason as its mode of calculating has become increasingly untenable. Rationality is not simply a set of computing skills; the mind works as a whole, and its whole includes our bodies and our emotions and imaginations. We have discovered—or at least people who didn't know these things all along have discovered—that we make sense of our experience and the world in narratives, that we can recall items in narratives better than in logically ordered lists, that we organize our memories more profoundly and reliably according to emotional rather than logical associations, and so on.

Any fact or event, according to Alasdair MacIntyre, "becomes intelligible by finding its place in a narrative." (1981, p. 196). And yet, developing the tool of narrative has tended to receive less attention than developing logical skills, which are seen to be more productive. But they are not separate chunks of our minds; logical skills need the development of narrative tools to be used most effectively.

One obvious reason why it would be desirable to pay more attention to narrative in education is that it is accessible to everyone. The focus on what Margaret Donaldson has called "disembedded" logical skills has disproportionately favored the minority of children who develop such skills early (1978). While those logical skills are important, when developed at the expense of narrative tools the results tend to be people who are good at doing specific things, but who lack flexibility and imagination. As Robert Coles notes, "A respect for narrative [is] everyone's rock-bottom capacity, but also a universal gift, to be shared with others" (1989, p. 30). That is, if our aim is the education of all children then it makes sense to attend to this basic and important intellectual skill we share and can use relatively easily for learning. So, instead of thinking of our lessons and units as sets of objectives we hope to attain, we can think of them as good narratives with which we hope to engage students' imaginations and emotions.

In the imaginative classroom we will be alert to narrative possibilities for all topics. Sometimes a brief narrative of a person's life can provide a context that makes particular knowledge meaningful and imaginatively engaging. To teach Pythagoras' theorem without some mention of Pythagoras' strange life and astounding and prophetic ambitions would be to ignore exactly what can make the theorem more generally meaningful and engaging. To teach the life cycle of

the eel without mentioning the amazing work of Johannes Schmidt in discovering that life cycle would be to greatly impoverish the topic. To study trees without exploring their central role in human history would be to miss out on what can make the botanical information gripping.