reader, "This is exactly what the person said." This is obvious but bears keeping in mind. Accuracy is essential. When I come to a conclusion about a subject, especially if it's a negative one, I return to that conclusion four or five times. If I've pegged someone as an arrogant jerk, I want to be sure the person really *is* one. I give the person many opportunities to repeat the offending behavior.

On the other hand, newspapers and magazines often publish quotes that are not what the person actually said. I have seen journalists unconsciously correct the English of professional people but not working-class or poor people. A journalist must make a conscious decision about correcting a person's grammar. I don't think that quotes should be sanded smooth; quotation marks mean that what is enclosed in them is verbatim. I face this issue a lot because I write about regular people in the community, and *real people talk real.* I'm using poor English here because that's how most of my subjects talk.

I wrote an article for *U.S. News & World Report* several years ago about the relationship between working-class Blacks and the Vietnamese immigrants who run the nail salons in their neighborhoods. I rendered their English the way they spoke it, angering many in the Vietnamese community. I used a translator for most of the interviews, but some of the things they said in English were more powerful as they actually said them. I don't regret my decision.

Letting people's voices come through, without having the reader think the person sounds ignorant, is an ongoing struggle. It is not just a question of craft, it's a question of our readers' assumptions and biases. The problem isn't necessarily people using nonstandard English. The problem is other people—the readers—judging them incorrectly because of that. The stories that my subjects live are amazing ones. Their humanity shines through the dangling participles.

On the other hand, we often have to write about people who aren't necessarily so amazing. One way to get people to say interesting things is to ask dumb questions. I ask really dumb questions. I let people talk as long as they want. If they don't talk, I sometimes remain silent. Silence makes people uncomfortable and people will keep talking to fill the space. Often, I'll play devil's advocate. When I was working on a story about a crack dealer, I spent a lot of time riding around his neighborhood with him. We passed some people who looked homeless. To test him I said, "Gee, look at those people. Why don't they clean themselves up?" He became very angry, telling me, "You're not better than those people!" After that he became sad. Little by little the true story of his circumstances came out. Making



people angry is a good way to get to the truth. I'm willing to be yelled at or disliked in the interest of the story. The real story, framed accurately and rendered honestly, is what counts.

## A Story Structure

### JON FRANKLIN

Narrative is chronology: This happens, that happens, the other thing happens, and then something else happens. All of our lives are narrative—usually a rather confusing version of it. Story is something else: taking select parts of a narrative, separating them from everything else, and arranging them so they have meaning. Meaning is intrinsic to storytelling.

That is one reason it's so difficult for those of us educated in newsrooms to understand storytelling. We're trained *not* to insert meaning in our news stories. But we mistake meaning for opinion. Journalism as we currently know it is relentlessly cognitive. We use facts; we prove things. Journalism has very little to do with meaning.

Narrative writers can bring meaning to journalism. The successful narrative writer presumes that he or she can find meaning in real life and can report on it.

Until the death of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1969, many people made their living writing short stories. With the demise of the general interest magazine, that livelihood all but vanished. No fewer writers are born today than fifty years ago, though. All the would-be writers had to go somewhere. Many of us were forced into journalism.

Like a lot of other writers, I soon grew frustrated by the limitations of journalism. I wanted to write stories. I found myself thinking that all good stories—fiction or nonfiction—must have some things in common. If so, we should be able to understand them and, with that understanding, more predictably find other good stories. I went hunting. I found that texts about writing published between 1900 and 1960, the age of the short story and realistic novel, talked a lot about what made stories powerful. They all focused on character and plot.

Anton Chekhov laid out the anatomy of story, defining a story by its points of change, or plot points. The first point of change, at the

end of the beginning, is the *character complication.* It is the point when the main character runs into something that complicates his or her life. The character complication comes where a nutgraf would go in a traditional newspaper narrative and can be interchangeable with it.

The *complication* isn't necessarily a *conflict*; it is merely something that forces the character to exert effort. It is often a conflict in the literature of Western cultures, but less so in the literature of African cultures.

In nearly all stories, the characters go through some transformation. The reporter may have trouble discerning it at first. If it isn't there, the reporter probably doesn't have a story. The key is to find that significant point of change.

My university students often write about people dying of cancer. I encourage this, actually, because too often no one wants to talk to dying people, although they really want to discuss what they are experiencing. My students often assume that the complication of their stories is the cancer. If terminal cancer is the complication, then death must be the ending. So, what's the meaning? That's hard to say.

Let's go back and look at the story again. Maybe the complication is something else. Most people who are dying of cancer receive their diagnosis and are afraid; they deny; they fight. In the end, they make peace with their cancer. The point of insight becomes the conquering of fear, not the diagnosis of cancer. By "point of insight" I mean the moment when the story turns toward the resolution, when the main character (and/or the reader) finally grasps the true nature of the problem and knows what must be done about it. The meaning: There are fates we can't change, but we can deal with them in ways that allow us to retain our dignity and our sense of control.

In most good stories the characters decide their own destinies. In the real world that often doesn't happen. In that way stories are not like real life. Good stories show how people survive.

All stories have three layers. The top layer is what actually happens—the narrative. The next layer is how those events make the main character feel. If the writer succeeds in getting the reader to suspend disbelief and see through the character's eyes, then the character's and the reader's feelings will be joined. There is another layer below the factual and the emotional. It is the rhythm of the piece and evokes the story's universal theme: love endures, wisdom prevails, children mature, war destroys, prejudice perverts.

The preeminent neuroanatomist of the mid-twentieth century, Paul MacLean, coined the phrase *triune brain.* His idea was that each person has three brains: One understands rhythm, one understands emotion, and the third is cognitive. The cognitive brain is programmable; it speaks English or Chinese or logic. But to really communicate deeply, a writer must use the languages of all three brains. That is why rhythms are so important to storytelling.



Storytelling can be symphonic. John Steinbeck wrote that he wanted *The Grapes of Wrath* to sound like Igor Stravinksy's *Firebird Suite.* Ernest Hemingway was a little more brutal. He chose Bach. If you take the first chapter of *Farewell to Arms* and read it aloud to the first movement of the Brandenburg Concerto, Hemingway's words seem to match the music perfectly.

The narrative writer may choose to speak at these three levels very consciously, but the effect on the reader is usually unconscious. Readers read very fast, seeing none of the layers. They simply feel it, as you feel a highway while traveling over it.

Rhythm exists in story from the sentence level right up to the sectional level. A lot of my writing is in blank verse. You don't need to know the names of the tropes; you just need to listen for them.

Looking at how the human brain developed—to make an extremely long story very short—it evolved to resolve complications. We like stories because we think in stories; it's how we derive meaning from the world. When you read a hard news story about something that interests you, you already know the context. That is to say, you know the narrative behind the piece of news. The human mind looks at the evidence—new information and past experience—and figures out scenarios, possible narratives. This is why structure reveals meaning and why we like stories that have structure.

## Summary vs. Dramatic Narrative

### JACK HART

**Most narrative pieces shift between summary and dramatic narrative. The summary provides the links between scenes, which are usually written in dramatic narrative. Standard news stories are written in summary narrative. But true storytelling requires mastery of dramatic narrative. Traditional journalists, because they have limited experience**

with dramatic narrative, often have a tough time distinguishing between the two. One of the reporters at my newspaper, who had been struggling to grasp the distinction between summary and dramatic narrative, finally saw the light. "Aha!" he said. "I get it. You're either *in* story, or you're *out* of story." *Exactly!*

The following chart shows the main distinctions between the two forms:

| **Summary Narrative** | **Dramatic Narrative** |
|---|---|
| Emphasizes the abstract | Emphasizes concrete detail |
| Collapses time | Readers experience action as if it were happening in real time |
| Employs direct quotes | Employs dialogue, characters talking to one another |
| Organized topically | Organized scenically |
| Omniscient point of view | Specific point of view |
| Writer hovers above the scene | Clear narrative stance<br>Writer is inside the scene |
| Deals with outcomes rather than process | Deals with process, gives specific description |
| Higher on the ladder of abstraction | Lower on the ladder of abstraction |
| Composed of digression, backstory, and explication | Composed of the story's main line of action |

# Weaving Story and Idea

## NICHOLAS LEMANN

Narrative nonfiction that is mere yarn-spinning won't ever rise to greatness. As practitioners of narrative nonfiction, we often seem to lack a full sense of the importance of ideas in our work. We need to develop a common set of techniques for combining ideas and narrative.



Tom Wolfe's anthology *The New Journalism* came out when I was a young lad starting out in journalism. I almost devoured it. Wolfe's wonderful introduction to the book had even more impact on me than the articles he anthologized. His introductory essay challenged the standards for journalistic criticism. At that time the aesthetics of journalism's literary and visual techniques were almost entirely missing from the grim-faced business of media criticism. But here came Wolfe with a joyous, funny, infectiously ambitious idea about the possibilities of journalism as an art form—poised on the brink of supplanting the novel as the richest and most vital form of published writing.

As important as that essay was to me, a couple of points of dissatisfaction with it have rattled around in my mind in the years since. Both relate to the weaving of *story* and *idea* in narrative writing.

First, Wolfe's thrillingly detailed playbook of techniques for new journalism doesn't fully describe what Wolfe does in his own journalistic work. Yes, Wolfe uses status details about dress and decor and accent, nailing everything to precise locations on a socioeconomic map. Yes, he uses set scenes. Yes, he writes from the characters' points of view. Yes, he includes a lot of dialogue. But those things are not all that he does.

He doesn't fully own up to the fact that he is not just a reporter and a narrativist, but also an intellectual. In his last and greatest narrative nonfiction work, *The Right Stuff,* he uses techniques that he doesn't really acknowledge: A master hypothesis drives the entire work, while he proposes constructs and rubrics throughout the book that drive and shape the story.

Wolfe begins the book with an elaborate, hilarious series of scenes about the lives of fighter pilots in the 1950s, establishing the eponymous "right stuff" as a master concept for the work. The "right stuff" is on the idea track. It is absolutely necessary, and it has to come first. Otherwise, you lose the wonderful joke of the early astronauts' humiliation, even as they are being publicly lionized as heroes over being put into space in capsules that they didn't actually pilot. This humiliation—more idea than event—permits the role of the press in the story to be treated as farce, to memorable effect.

In addition to offering us precise status details, Wolfe offers us a wonderful anthropology and psychology of fighter pilots, bureaucrats, politicians, and the press. *The Right Stuff* is an elaborately disguised public policy analysis of a government agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. The book argues that space