Telling Stories with Research

Narratological Methods for Fun and Profit

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- 'An account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them; a narration, a story, an account'. (*OED*)

- Put very simply, 'story' consists of all the events which are to be depicted. 'Plot' is the chain of causation which dictates that these are somehow linked and that therefore they can be depicted in relation to each other. 'Narrative' is the showing or telling of these events and the mode selected for that to take place. (Paul Cobley, *Narrative* (Routledge, 2006), 5-6)

What is a Narrative?

Writing Biographies

'A narrative is a particular selection of events, centred around a particular agent, narrated in a particular order, in a particular form, for a particular purpose'.

- Write three or four sentences that summarise your life. Try not to think too much about this (it is a speed exercise), just put a pen to paper and write.

- What commonalities do you see between the biographies?
- What differences?

Exercise 1

Personal Biography	Academic Biography
Born in Cardiff too long ago to remember, I lived in a small village outside Cardiff for eighteen years. I hated school, but did enough to get to university and initially studied Mathematics at York. However, I soon changed my mind and switched to English at Aberystwyth. I gained my first academic appointment in 2005.	Will Slocombe is Lecturer in American Literature at the University of Liverpool. He is the author of *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern* (Routledge, 2006) and has published numerous articles on post-1945 British and American literature, and new media narratology. He is currently writing articles on various SF texts.

Exercise 1: Two Biographies

- Narratology / narrative theory has existed since works such as Aristotle's *Poetics*, but came into its own following the rise of structuralism and semiotics – it looks at the *structures of / in stories*.

- Narratology is 'the science of narratives'. It is not limited to one discipline, but crosses, for example, literature, art, film, history, and architecture.

What is Narrative Theory / Narratology?

GENRE THEORY

Different texts can be grouped together via genres, as they share particular characteristics (style, tone, narration, effect, etc.)

- As such, academic / scholarly writing is a genre – what characteristics does it have?

- PhD theses might be called a 'sub-genre' of academic writing – how do they look in your discipline?

(Useful?) Areas of Narrative Theory

'STORY HOOKS'

A 'story hook' is the opening to the narrative that is meant to 'hook' the reader's attention. Whilst this is a common trope in fiction, it can be—albeit very carefully—adapted for academic writing.

- What is the 'initial gambit'? How does your introduction situate the reader and encourage them to read on?
- What is the mystery / problem you are going to solve, the idea that you will shed light on?

(Useful?) Areas of Narrative Theory

JUMPING INTO (THE) ACTION

Beginning *in media res* means beginning in the middle. It can be a very effective strategy for taking the reader straight to the central point and then examining issues around it, in particular types of thesis. Can this be achieved through a case study or brief anecdote?

- Is there a particular episode or element of your research that allows you to situate the reader 'in the middle' of the (research) action?

(Useful?) Areas of Narrative Theory

Take a break...

IMPLIED AUTHOR (Wayne Booth)

The 'implied author' is 'that authorial element whose presence is inferred in a work' – it is not the real author, but the product of the reader reconstructing a sense of the author from textual evidence.

- What does your style of writing say about you?
- How do you make your work appear to be worthy of passing a *viva voce* through how your present yourself?

(Useful?) Areas of Narrative Theory

IMPLIED READER (Wayne Booth)

The 'implied reader' is the '*presumed addressee'* or '*ideal recipient'* of the work. It is the imaginary person you are writing the thesis for.

- What knowledge are you assuming about your reader?
- What knowledge do you (need to) assume the reader has?
- What do they need to know to understand the significance of your research *[context]*? Should you relate this to them overtly?

(Useful?) Areas of Narrative Theory

FREQUENCY

The number of times an event occurs vs. how it is narrated.

- 'I worked on my computer today' (one event, one description).
- 'I work on my computer everyday' (multiple events, one description).

ORDER

The order of the narrative vs. the order of events:

- Murder Mystery: 'Crime – Discovery – Capture' in 'real life' but 'Discovery - Crime – Capture' in narrative.

"Order" gives rise to various rhetorical techniques, such as:

- Analepsis / 'flash-forward'.
- Prolepsis / 'flash-back'.

The Basic Principles of Narratology (Genette)

NARRATION

The way in which the story is told (narrator/perspective):

- Intradiagetic or extradiagetic (narrator is inside or outside the narrative).
- Homodiagetic or heterodiagetic (narrator is or is not a character).

DURATION

The length of time an event takes vs. the amount of time in the narrative:

- 'I lived in a small village outside Cardiff for eighteen years' (long duration, short narration).
- Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* or James Joyce's *Ulysses* (short duration—a day—but long narration).

The Basic Principles of Narratology (Genette)

'A narrative is a particular selection of events, centred around a particular agent, narrated in a particular order, in a particular form, for a particular purpose'

- Thus, your thesis has a narrative. You are taking the reader on a journey from point A (the beginning) to point B (the end) – how do you help them to get there…?

- How might you rephrase the above quotation to fit your research area?

'My thesis is **a particular selection of events**, centred around **a particular agent [usually me]**, narrated **in a particular order**, in the form of an academic treatise, for **a particular purpose [other than the *viva voce*]**'

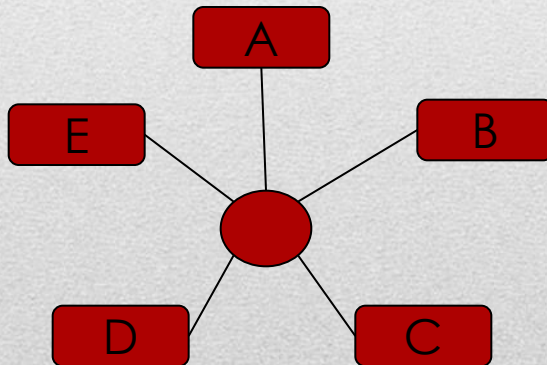# Why Narratology Is Relevant to Your Thesis

- Consider the following chapter structures:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

A Linear Model – Forwards in Time

| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

A Linear Model – Backwards in Time

A

E   B

D   C

A Thematic Model – Different Influences on or Areas of One Topic

How Narratology Is Relevant to Your Thesis

- Think about how you have (or intend to) structure the PhD thesis.

- In your groups, discuss the following issues:
  - Why did you pick the structure you did?
  - What does that structure enable you to do? What does it mean you can't do?
  - Can other members of the group think of other elements that might contribute to the structural plan of the thesis?

How Narratology Is Relevant to Your Thesis

In order to make the critical components of your thesis more thorough, and to ensure you know what you are doing and why, think about the following questions:

Frequency

Can I use the principle of frequency to highlight important points by repetition? Where can I summarise multiple events/texts quickly?

Order

How have I ordered my thesis? Why have I ordered it in this way? Why haven't I ordered it in another way? What links together any creative components? Where do I place my 'literature reviews'? What about signposting / summaries, analepsis, and prolepsis? (Note that the order of the 'narrative' might be different to the order of 'the research'.)

How Narratology Is Relevant to Your Thesis

Narration

Have I interposed myself in the thesis ('In contrast, I argue that…')? Where have I done this? Can I justify why? How close am I to the narrative being told – is this an 'omniscient / impersonal' view or does it need to be more subjective at times?

Duration

Have all important elements / critics / texts been discussed in enough detail? If not, why not? How long do I need to spend discussing my major models / critics / theorists?

How Narratology Is Relevant to Your Thesis

- Your thesis will be read by an examiner (at least two examiners) – make it readable to them, and remember that they need to take breaks (build in summaries, don't use over-long chapters)…

- Your thesis will, ideally, be turned into a monograph or series of peer-reviewed articles – how do you address that audience (particularly in terms of how dependent the thesis context is)?

- Even more ideally, in the world of 'impact' and 'engagement', you will be able to disseminate work across disciplines and to the general public – how do you translate your research into a way that captures the attention of audiences outside your discipline?

Important General Points