

Chapter 4: Story structures

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The elements of a story's structure

- Opening (O)
- Challenge (C)
- Action (A)
- Resolution (R)

Opening

- Who are the characters, including the main character the story is about?
- Where does the story take place?
- What do you need to understand to follow the story?
- What is the larger problem being addressed?

Challenge

- What are your characters trying to accomplish?
- What specific question are you trying to answer?

Action

- What happens to address the challenge?
- What work did you do or are proposing to do (for a proposal)?

Resolution

- How have the characters and their world changed as a result of the action?
- What did you learn from your work

Four core story structures

- OCAR
 - Slowest, takes time to work into the story
- ABDCE
 - Faster, starts in the action
- LD
 - Faster yet
- LDR
 - Fastest with the whole story up front

OCAR

- Opening – Challenge – Action – Resolution
- Typical of science papers
 - Challenge is at the end of the introduction
 - Resolution comes at the conclusion

ABDCE

- Action
 - Starts with dramatic action to immediately engage readers
- Background
 - Describe characters and setting so that readers can understand the story
- Development
 - Follow the action as the story develops to the climax

ABDCE

- Climax
 - Bring all the threads of the story together and address them
- Ending
 - Same as resolution: what happened to the characters after the climax?
- Typical of modern fiction and scientific proposals

A good story is circular

- Typical of OCAR and ABDCE structures
- By the end, we are back at the beginning
 - But things have changed, and we need to highlight how they have changed

LD

- Lead/Development or the inverted pyramid of news stories
 - Core of the story is in the first sentence (lead)
 - Rest of the story fills out the story (development)
- In LD, the lead collapses opening, challenge and resolution into a single short section (as short as a sentence).

LDR

- Lead/Development and Resolution
- Typical of magazine articles
 - The lead must be engaging, but the resolution is left for the end, to entice the reader to go to the end

Story structure in science writing

- Scientific paper: OCAR
 - O: opening is larger problem and central “characters”
 - C: challenge is interesting question
 - A: action is research plan and results
 - R: resolution is conclusion about how our understanding about the world has changed as a result of the work

Story structure in science writing

- Generalist journals (*Nature, Science*): LDR
 - Editors are professionals, not scientists
 - Structure should be similar to other magazines
 - Start with a strong lead to interest the editors

Story structure in science writing

- Proposals: LDR or ABDCE
 - Your proposal must convince reviewers that the topic identified in the opening is important
 - It must fill them with excitement at the questions posed in the challenge
 - If it has not done so within the first two pages, you will lose your audience and not get funded

IMRaD

- Introduction
- Methods
- Results
- and
- Discussion

Mapping OCAR to IMRaD

- Introduction
 - Opening
 - Background
 - Challenge

Mapping OCAR to IMRaD

- Introduction:
 - Opening
 - First paragraph
 - Introduces the larger problem targeted by the paper
 - What is the context?
 - What are the characters we are studying?

Mapping OCAR to IMRaD

- Introduction:
 - Background
 - Extension of the Opening section, fleshes out characters
 - What information does the reader need to understand this work?
 - Why is it important?
 - What does it contribute to the larger issues?

Mapping OCAR to IMRaD

- Introduction:
 - Challenge
 - What are the specific hypotheses/questions/goals of this paper?

Mapping OCAR to IMRaD

- Materials and Methods (M&M):
 - Begins describing the Action
 - What did you do?

Mapping OCAR to IMRaD

- Results:
 - Continues describing the Action
 - What were your findings?

Mapping OCAR to IMRaD

- Discussion:
 - Climax and Resolution
 - What do your findings mean?
 - What did you learn?
 - If there is a conclusion, this will be your Resolution

Mapping OCAR to IMRaD

- Opening = beginning of Introduction
- Challenge = end of Introduction
- Action = M&M + Results + Most Discussion
- Resolution = end of Discussion

Resolution

- Extremely important
- Show how your work has changed our understanding of the world
- Map back your resolution to your opening
 - It must say something about the larger problem you identified there
- Your conclusion should address a topic as wide as your opening

Hourglass structure

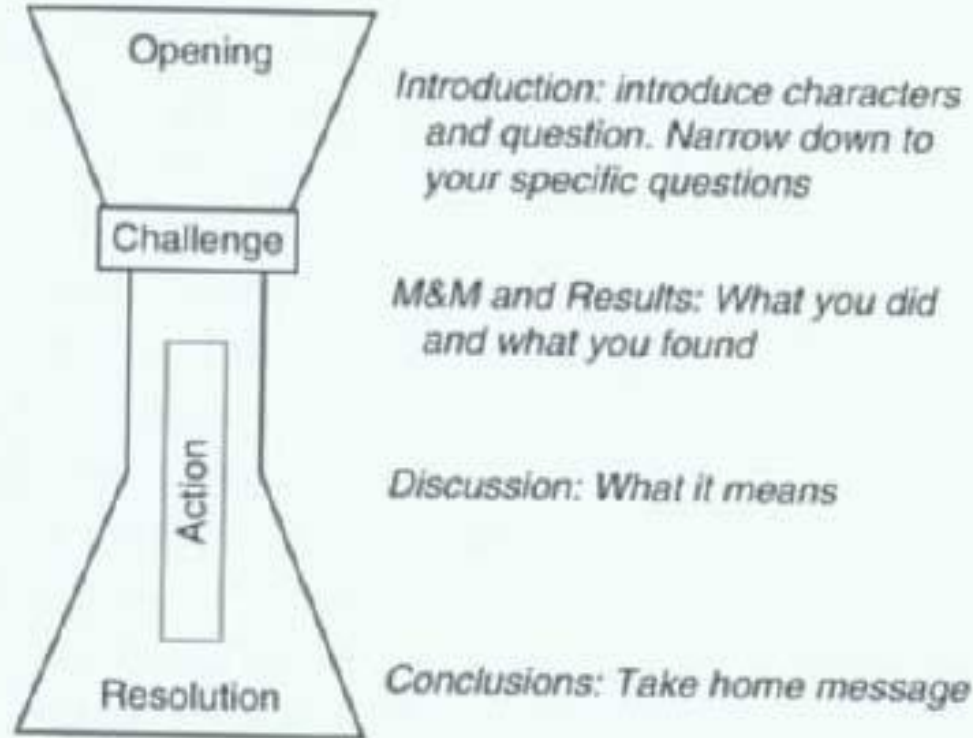


Figure 4.2. The hourglass structure of a paper. It starts wide with the opening, narrows with the challenge and action, and widens back out again at the resolution.

Exercises

- Look at the paper you suggested
 - Which story structure does it use?
 - Where are its OCAR elements?
- Look at the paper you are writing
 - Are the OCAR elements in place?
 - If not, rewrite your paper to include them

