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
• **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
• 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
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