Introduction to Narrative Journalism

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Real Stories, Artfully Told

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Introduction

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live."
– Joan Didion

Welcome to Narrative Journalism! While this genre/craft/form of art goes by many names (i.e. Creative Nonfiction, Narrative Nonfiction, Literary Nonfiction, New Journalism, etc.), narrative journalism is most simply defined as the following: **storytelling** (narrative) through the use of **primary** and **secondary** research (journalism). Narrative journalism is ALWAYS concerned with nonfiction writing (true stories!), but what sets narrative journalism apart from say, history or news journalism, is that narrative journalism is hyper-focused on the *craft* of the story, often relying on literary techniques more often found in fiction writing. As a framework, these literary techniques will be explored through the five elements of fiction: theme, character, setting, plot, and point of view.

This textbook is largely organized around these five elements of fiction, though the first couple of chapters are concerned with foundational journalism concepts, including Ethics (Chapter 1) and Research (Chapter 2). Following these chapters on journalism basics, we then delve into what uniquely defines **narrative journalism** from other forms of journalism. Not only do the elements of fiction create some structure for the textbook, but we will also work through and explore a sequence of projects that engages with these various elements in creative and informative ways.

One of the most useful aspects of this text is the abundance of student examples featured within, examples that showcase the different projects and elements of fiction through inventive

and instructive ways. I've added commentary throughout each example to supplement the more explicit instruction found in each chapter.

As we set off on this journey into the world of narrative journalism and just how we integrate literary techniques into our journalistic endeavors, there are a few key terms of be mindful of as they will be referred to regularly throughout the text:

Primary Research
Secondary Research
Angle
Scope

1. Ethics

"If I were to offer any advice to young writers, it would be this: be discriminating and be discerning about the work you set for yourself. That done, be the untutored traveler, the eager reader, the enthusiastic listener. Put what you learn together carefully, and then write thoughtfully, with respect both for the reader and your sources."
– Barry Lopez

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this chapter are as follows:

- To fully understand the four obligations that a narrative journalist must navigate and how that informs their work.
- To draw connections between these obligations and the concept of 'purpose' as it relates to a narrative journalist and their work.

This book begins with a chapter on ethics, because ethics should be a foundation of all that we do as narrative journalists. Ethics are ALWAYS a concern and consideration for journalists, not least for narrative journalists. However, as much as we are concerned with ethical issues such as disclosure, on

and off the record, manipulating facts/quotes to fit our story, "fake news," and more, one of the most important ethical concerns for a narrative journalist comes down to what our 'purpose' is for a story, how we realize that purpose, and what 'ethically-suspect' actions we might take in service of that purpose.

Jacqui Banaszynski and Fernanda Santos explain it best in their panel discussion at the 2021 Power of Narrative Conference held at Boston University. Banaszynski explains the obligations we have as journalists: obligations to the profession, obligations to the story subject(s), obligations to the readers, and obligations to the truth ("or as close as we can get to it" – Jacqui Banaszynski).

The full discussion can be found below:

🖳 *One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oer.pressbooks.pub/narrativejournalism/?p=5#oembed-1*

Let's unpack these relationships further as they relate to ethics and our "purpose" for our stories. And, it is important to notice that Banaszynski does not mention anything about prioritizing what the journalist wants.

- **Obligations to the profession**: we as journalists represent journalists everywhere, and when one of us makes self-serving or suspect decisions ethically, it harms the entire profession. If Donald Trump and his obsession with the phrase "fake news" has taught us anything, it is that the journalism profession has no status or influence without

the trust of the people, and so we must be that much better, that much more honest and transparent and thorough and humble, because there are forces working against us. Regardless of what we want of our stories, our obligations remain with the four-way relationship Banaszynski described above.

- **Obligations to the story subjects**: Fernanda Santos points out an essential truth when it comes to reporting on our story subjects:

"I say [to my story subjects], look, you have the power because it's your story that I'm trying to tell. Help me tell your story. And I'll always say, if there's anything I'm not asking you, if there is anything you want to show me, that you're embarrassed [of], please help me understand your world. Don't paint a rosy picture if it's not rosy. I really want to understand, because unless other people understand, there is never going to be anything done to help improve your life... but if I can use my megaphone to tell your story to others that is truthful, that is touching, that is poignant, that's compelling, then there is a possibility that something will happen...[....]"

Our obligation to our story subjects is to tell their stories. We are storytellers at our most fundamental level, and as Fernanda Santos explains, our job is to tell stories in 'truthful,' 'touching,' 'poignant,' 'compelling' ways in order to touch our readers, which leads us into the next obligation.

- **Obligations to our readers**: if you are a writer of narrative nonfiction, your readers expect to read nonfiction. No

matter how many literary devices we want to incorporate or how talented we are at writing nonfiction in a way that mirrors fiction, we are still telling true stories, and if we break that trust, if we bend our stories to fit what we want as writers, than we have broken one of the most fundamental relationships we have as writers. In addition, as mentioned above, we are nothing without the trust of our readers, and what we do as narrative nonfiction writers is of dire importance because there is far too much information available, and it is up to us to provide full stories, complete stories, insightful stories into the lives of those around us.

- **Obligations to the truth**: I'm not sure there is too much more to be said that hasn't already been covered in the three bullet points above, but truth is the great unifier of all of them. Truth is what grounds all of the other obligations, and we must approach each of those other relationships through a lens of truth. Banaszynski clarifies "or as close as we can get to it," because truth in journalism is not as clearcut as we might like to believe. Truth means different things to different people, and our story subjects might have a different truth to our readers or even to others in our profession, and this can complicate things as we strive to reflect truth in our writing. But, as with any work of journalism, in the end it comes through us, the writer, and the truth we see emerging from our thorough and tireless research.

The bottom line is this: always be mindful of the four obligations we have as narrative journalists and shrewdly make use of our two most valuable tools when it comes to ethics: *honesty* and *transparency*.

I will end this chapter with a short story about *sensationalism* and its potential impact when we do not fully consider the four-way relationship described above: in Julian

Rubinstein's book, *[The Holly: Five Bullets, One Gun, and the Struggle to Save an American Neighborhood](#)*, a terrific piece of narrative journalism, Rubinstein tells the story of Terrance Roberts, a gang member turned anti-gang activist, while weaving in the history of gang violence and the police corruption spurring it on. He tells a complex and nuanced tale incorporating history, dynamic characters, and an expose that will make you question what you know and understand about the 'boogeyman of gang violence' out in our streets. In stark contrast, Rubinstein details a National Geographic docuseries titled *Drugs, Inc.*, in which one of the episodes focuses on the Park Hill neighborhood, the location of The Holly and Terrance Roberts' home. In the book, Terrance recounts his experience, one in which he advocated for his 'camo movement,' an anti-gang effort, and he brought in some of the young Bloods to demonstrate the power of the movement and to illustrate that change is possible if the socioeconomic conditions could be addressed. When the [episode aired](#), the Nat. Geo. production focused solely on the violence and the drugs, sensationalizing the stereotype, and completely neglecting Terrance Roberts, the camo movement, and the deeper systemic issues related to gang violence. This ended up being a catalyst for more violence in the neighborhood, pulling Terrance Roberts back into a life he worked so hard to remove himself from.

2. Research

"We can't write the beautiful narrative stories that we all dream of unless we can get some things from the mouths of our sources. They must be comfortable enough to tell us anything. In journalism school, no one called the interactions between journalists and sources relationships, but that's what they are."
– Isabel Wilkerson

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this chapter are as follows:

- To learn the difference between primary and secondary research, and the function of each as it relates to narrative journalism.
- To understand the various types of primary and secondary research, and the tools and skills that are available when conducting any form of research.

Research is EVERYTHING to a journalist, and though it sounds cliche, it is entirely true. Not only is research the foundation of any piece of narrative journalism and almost always drives the narrative, but it also informs the journalist and keeps the

journalist honest. Regardless of the journalist's hopes or expectations for a story, the research is the most important piece, and this means the journalist has to listen to the research and follow the research.

For the sake of ease, we'll define research into two categories: 1.) **primary research**, and 2.) **secondary research.**

Primary Research:

Primary research is the research that the journalist acquires first-hand, be it interviews, surveys, experiments, personal experience or observation, etc. This research gets us as close as possible to the source and the "moment" of a story. This is the sort of research that drives the story in a piece of narrative journalism.

The Interview:

The interview is the most crucial form of primary research for a narrative journalist. This is where we can get closest to the heart of any story, as nearly every story revolves around some aspect of the human experience, and well, people are, of course, the key to deepening our understanding the human experience. The interview is also the most challenging form of primary research, as it often takes a great deal of work to set-up and schedule interviews, as well as to document those interviews, be it with a recording device, note-taking, or some other method. In addition, meaningful interviews take time—like a long time—as the quote by Wilkerson attests to. Your subjects will only be invested in an interview if you are invested in them—who they are and what they have to say. "To complete an assignment" or "to ask a few questions" are not very compelling reasons for a story subject to open up to you.

Because of the complexity of the interview format and the many factors that determine what is a "good" or "bad" interview, there is really no right way to conduct an interview. My advice is to find your feet by *doing*. Some basics, however, are as follows:

1.) Yes/No questions are not helpful.

2.) Silences are okay, even good at times (they often lead to our subjects revealing more).

3.) While prep questions can be helpful, don't be afraid to follow the conversation (adhering to a reformatted script will hinder the flow).

4.) The best "interviews" don't feel like interviews at all, but rather like conversations with close friends.

Surveys:

Surveys can be incredibly valuable as a way to gauge public opinion on anything. This can be as simple as a shared experience on a college campus, or something as complex as public policy and the impact on a certain neighborhood. With the prevalence of social media, surveys can be conducted remotely with ease, and this is an excellent method to get a 'sense' of an issue's impact on groups of people.

Experiments:

While experiments often bring to mind laboratories and research in the sciences, experiments can also be invaluable to narrative journalists. For a journalist, experiments can be anything that the journalist partakes in to understand something on a more immediate, personal level. For example, I spent my first semester of graduate school experimenting with garbage waste production. My roommates and I had a competition of who could go the longest without creating a

single item of garbage (i.e. something that couldn't be recycled or composted). This 'experiment' taught me an incredible amount about the drawbacks of our consumer culture and how much time and effort it takes to actually lessen our impact on the systems of waste disposal. I don't believe I could have learned any of that information, or at least not in the same way, without actually experimenting.

Personal Observation:

This might seem obvious having explored the various primary sources available to us, but your personal experience and observations can and should be drawn upon as you craft your stories. Not only does this apply to lived experience, but your own photographs, your video footage, and any other documentation of your first-hand experience helps to bring your readers into a story.

Secondary Research:

Secondary research is research that is acquired through previous publications, whether they be articles, books, databases, reviews, etc. This sort of research can be found in libraries, on the web, or any other place one might look for previously published work. This is the sort of research used to provide context surrounding the main storyline.

Library Resources:

Though it should go without saying, libraries are some of the best resources any journalist or researcher have available to them. Not only is there an abundance of sources in libraries, free of charge, but there are experts in libraries whose sole

job is to help you research more effectively. Seek out these resources!

Web Resources:

As everything seems to move online, so do our library resources, and everything that was once available in libraries can now be accessed from your home, as long as you have a computer and internet connectivity. While the 'great big web' can be equally productive and counterproductive, it is often a good place to start your research, as a quick google search or database visit can provide a lot of direction.

Archives:

This is, in my opinion, the unsung hero of secondary sources. Historical archives are available, and though they often take more time and effort to locate and gain access to, the documents cataloged in archives are some of the most treasured pieces of research you will ever find. You can seek out actual physical archives in museums, etc., or you can visit the places of interest that have physical records—for example, tax records at your local township. If you like a good treasure hunt, archives might just be itch you've been waiting to scratch.

Both forms of research are essential to any piece of narrative journalism. Without the primary, the narrative suffers; without the secondary, the narrative can seem flimsy or superficial. Context is crucial for the reader to fully understand the **angle** and **scope** of a piece (see Chapter 4 for more on this).

3. The Five Elements of Fiction

"We are all born storytellers."
– Fernanda Santos

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this chapter are as follows:

- To develop a basic understanding of the five elements of fiction.
- To foster a deeper appreciation for literary techniques applied to nonfiction work.

I often begin a course of Narrative Journalism with the question: What "elements" must all stories have for them to be 'stories'? What follows is a cascade of student responses that touch on character, setting, meaning and theme, conflict and events and terms used to describe the plot or story arc. And indeed, all stories must be about someone or something, and this someone or something will exist in some sort of environment, whether that be a concrete or abstract place. And yes, all stories should have meaning, and meaning that

we can connect with as human beings. Even with characters situated in a place, there must also be things happening (or deliberately not happening) to someone or something for any story to progress. The fifth element of fiction is more related to craft and technique rather than content, and while it is celebrated in fiction writing, it is equally useful in creative nonfiction—that element is point of view.

While Creative Writing scholars are not always in agreement about the elements of fiction, general consensus outlines five essential elements that feature in all stories: they are 1.) Theme, 2.) Character, 3.) Setting, 4.) Plot, and 5.) Point of View.

Theme:

As described at the beginning of this chapter, we read stories to see ourselves revealed in them, to find meaning in them through a character's trials and tribulations. While much depends on the individual reader, a writer creates characters, places them in particular places, chooses a point of view (or more), and organizes events in a certain way in order to teach us something or show us something that means something. While theme often describes broad concepts like love or honor or vengeance or solidarity, most stories also carry with them a message, a more specific statement about the theme or themes. Without meaning, stories are forgettable. Meaning gives stories true life.

Character:

Character is perhaps the most important element of fiction, as things must happen to someone or something in order for a story to progress. Not only is this crucial for story development,

but as human beings, we read stories and enjoy stories because we can see ourselves in them, often through the characters. In order to understand this element of "character," and how we as narrative journalists can more deliberately craft our stories, there are a few keywords that should be defined further:

Protagonist:

The protagonist is your main character, your lead, the character the story revolves around. Think Harry Potter or Anne of Green Gables or Pee Wee Herman or the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.

Antagonist:

The antagonist is your 'villain,' the character who often creates the most strife and struggle for the protagonist. While nonfiction doesn't always include characters that fulfill certain 'roles,' it is important to think about relationships between characters, particularly relationships between your story subject (your protagonist) and others, whether they be central or peripheral characters.

Round vs. Flat Characters

Round versus Flat are terms used to describe character development. Round characters are fully developed, 'human' characters, full of complexity and nuance. They have the capacity for the full range of human emotion, and they are capable of both right and wrong. Think Ted Lasso or Cersei Lannister from Game of Thrones. Flat characters are typically one-dimensional. They are stereotypes, essentially. Think Voldemort from Harry Potter, or Mr. Belding from Saved by the Bell.

Static vs. Dynamic Characters

Static versus Dynamic are also terms used to describe character development. Static characters are characters who do not experience any sort of change throughout the story. Dynamic characters do experience change, often profound change, and this can be physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. While there is space for both static and dynamic characters in stories (based on what the characters represent within the story), readers connect better with dynamic characters.

Setting:

As important as characters are, characters are both influenced by and hold influence over the places they inhabit and visit. In addition, the sequence of events (discussed in the next element below) are inextricably linked to "place." All that being said, "place" and "setting" deserve further description and definition:

Place:

When setting is concerned, there is a spectrum of both place and time. Place encompasses geographical location, of course, but also everything that plays a part of that mosaic. The people, the culture, the community, the politics, the weather, the physical landscape, the weather, the flora and fauna, all of it contributes to what a place is and how the characters interact with it. Think about a story taking place in the Arctic Circle versus a story on a remote desert island. Think about your hometown versus New York City or a small town out in rural

Tennessee. Place matters for more reasons than simple geography.

Time:

Likewise, time must be defined on a spectrum. Time can mean literal time of day, the season, the era, and all of these deviations of time will impact the characters and the story monumentally. Think about stories set at night versus in the day, summertime stories versus other seasons, stories that take place during WWII versus science fiction stories of the future.

Plot:

Plot (what I often refer to as narrative design) can be defined as the sequence of events in which the story plays out, but on a fundamental level, it encompasses much more than that, and in order to fully embrace the power of plot from the perspective of "craft", we must explore those elements. The traditional western plot structure follows what is called the inverted checkmark.

Graphic depiction of the inverted checkmark plot structure.
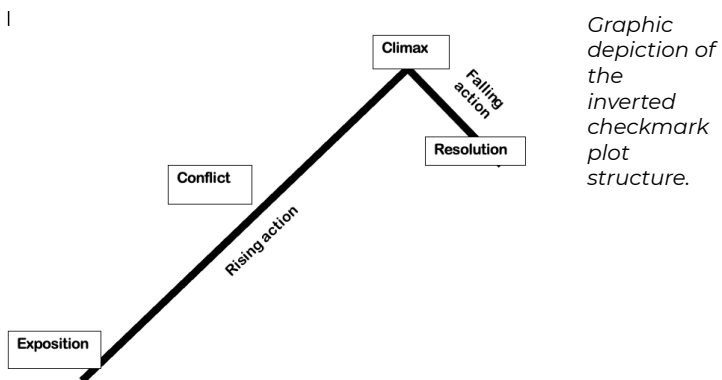
The inverted pyramid plot structure follows the classic "hero quest," where the protagonist experiences struggle and conflict as the action rises, then the story reaches its tipping point, or climax, and in the falling action the protagonist experiences some sort of change, whether physical, mental, spiritual, etc. Some of the key terms to be aware of are the following:

Exposition:

Exposition is all the stuff included at the beginning of a story to provide context. Characters might be introduced. The setting might be described. Some sort of tension might appear. There isn't a lot of action in the exposition, but it sets everything up so that action can begin.

Rising Action:

The rising action is everything that happens leading up to the climax, including the conflict. This is when all of the tension builds, conflict rages, and we reach a breaking point in the story.

Conflict:

The conflict is often defined as the main struggle that the protagonist experiences. This could be physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or a combination of these.

Climax:

The climax of the story is the turning point. This is when the conflict and tension reach their crescendo and typically the

most important scene or event takes place. Typically, the story begins to conclude after the climax.

Falling Action:

The falling action is everything that occurs following the climax. It takes us out of the story and winds everything down.

Resolution:

The resolution is the conclusion of a story, typically focusing on some change that the protagonist has experienced.

While we can not invent events or plot points in a piece of nonfiction, we are in complete control of the narrative design and how those events are revealed to the audience. Techniques such as **flashback**, **flash forward**, and **suspense** are all extremely effective in narrative journalism.

Point of View:

Point of view is perhaps the unsung hero of literary devices. This element is inherent in any form of storytelling, and while it doesn't shout out to us and demand our attention as an aspect of craft because of how natural it is, it impacts everything in terms of how we experience a story. Below are the different types of point of view and the impact they can have in a story:

First Person:

First person point of view takes the form of the first person

pronoun "I," "me," "we." This point of view is very compelling as it brings us intimately close to the narrator, and while there is often a question of the narrator's reliability, first person is very engaging through its use of tone and voice.

Second Person:

Second person point of view takes the form of the second person pronoun "you." This is the least commonly used point of view, though it has its use in "choose your own adventure" style stories. This point of view puts the reader directly into the story, but it can often feel inauthentic and contrived.

Third Person:

Third person point of view takes the form of the third person pronouns, "he," "she," "they." This point of view is one of the most common, particularly in nonfiction, but it can be broken down further according to **psychic distance** from the characters (listed in order from most psychic distance to least).

- Objective: Objective 3rd person POV is fully removed from the thoughts and feelings of the characters. With 3rd person objective, we only hear words and see actions. This the traditional point of view for stage plays.
- Limited (Omniscient): Limited omniscient 3rd person POV delves into the thoughts and feelings of one character, often the protagonist. With this point of view, we get into the psyche of the character.
- Omniscient: Omniscient 3rd person POV delves into the thoughts and feelings of all of the characters. There is no **psychic distance** between the reader and the characters, and this point of view can be used to set up dramatic irony, where the characters don't understand one another,

while the reader has insight into what motivates and frustrates each character.

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4. Theme

"There's a resurgence of narrative in the last few years, [...] and maybe that's because we no longer in journalism have information as our primary currency [...], so I think what we have to do is look more and more for ways to provide meaning."
– Jacqui Banaszynski

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this chapter are as follows:

- To draw connections between the element of fiction, theme, and the strategies and techniques available in narrative journalism.
- To understand the key concepts of 'angle' and 'scope' as they relate to narrative journalism.

As discussed in the previous chapter, oftentimes for us to be interested in stories, we must be able to find meaning in them. This can happen in a variety of ways, and considering how diverse and varied readership is of any piece of fiction or nonfiction, much of the extracted meaning of a story is dependent on the individual reader. That is not to say the journalist doesn't have a role in the "shape" of the meaning. On

the contrary, everything the journalist includes in the story will be for some purpose, and that purpose, though it may shift at different points in the creation process or even the story itself, that initial purpose or meaning is what provides the foundation of meaning for the entire story. This is often referred to as the "theme" and/or "message."

The difference between the two, theme and message, is an important one, however. Theme refers to general ideas about the human experience: love, jealousy, greed, beauty, vulnerability, etc. The message is what a writer wants to say about a particular theme through the vehicle of the story. In fiction, there are few rules in terms of theme and message and the author's purpose and manner of conveying that purpose.

In narrative journalism, as has been discussed at length in Chapter 1: Ethics, we have more to consider than simply what we, the journalist, want to say and the meaning we want to impart. That being the case, I use the following two terms to discuss theme and message as they apply to narrative journalism: **angle** and **scope**.

Angle and Scope:

Angle:

The angle is most simply defined as the journalist's perspective on the subject/story subject, or what exactly the journalist wants to communicate. Now this can manifest in a variety of ways, but as Fernanda Santos explains to her story subjects, "your story will filter through me, and will be constructed with other reporting beyond what you tell me, it will be constructed with who I am, with everything that I have lived, because all of that also influences the way we approach storytelling, the way we ask people and how much we listen and how we listen

and how we put things together." This quote is completely tied into angle. We decide what information is important enough to put into a story, we choose the narrative structure, we find meaning in the stories we report on and in the people within those stories, and all of that put together influences our perspective, and that is what we put forth to our readers.

Scope:

Scope refers to the narrative scope of the article. How much narrative will be woven into your article is an important consideration because our stories come to life through the narrative, but we cannot reconstruct entire lives on the page for our readers. We must choose how much narrative to include based on what interactions we have with the story subject(s). The narrative scope should involve the journalist, as that sort of hands-on reporting is essential in bringing scenes and characters to life. The scope may differ depending on the project type and length. A classic character profile might have a narrative scope of a single meeting. Narrative journalists working on book length manuscripts might report for years, and those years of reporting form the narrative scope. For example, Adrien Nicole LeBlanc spent ten years reporting on a Puerto Rican family in the Bronx and their struggles in a small but intricately woven community in her book, *Random Family*.

Let's take a look at a couple of student examples and how they explore these concepts of angle and scope. In the first example, Shaza Maatouk presents us with a very compelling *Humans of New York* style character snapshot with a clear angle:

Example 1

Shaza Maatouk

"A talent is something you are born with. A skill is something you acquire over many years of training, practice, and hard work. I am not talented, I am skilled. From a very young age, I knew that I wasn't very book smart. I always wanted to enhance the creativity within me and take it to a whole new level. After finding out that magic was my passion, I decided that I was going to become a magician. I didn't know how I was going to do it or when that was going to happen but, before I knew it, I was a so-called "beginner magician." It's been 13 years since I performed my first show. Fortunately, this journey has taught me several things. Most importantly, it taught me how to believe in myself more than anyone else. So, hone your craft, do what you love, and don't let anything stop you!"

The image and the quote worked perfectly together to articulate a very specific aspect of the story subject. Shaza wants to communicate the story subject's passion for magic. The quote and the image capture this almost obsession for and devotion to this creative art form.

In the next example, Madelyn Vasbinder shares a character sketch of her mother:

Example 2

Madelyn Vasbinder

COMP 310

Professor Wielechowski

7 Feb 2021

Project 1B Revision

2007. The basement light was off over her head, just the lamp over her desk stayed on, lighting up her work space. It saved money in electricity, or so she thought. She yawned, moving around the piece of fabric to find the right positioning for it before she sewed it on. The clock behind her head read 1:24. It wasn't the afternoon. She had work in the morning, a paper due after that. Dinner to make before that. But for right now, for this mid-October evening, she had to sew. Sew little pieces of clay onto tulle fabric, sew that tulle fabric onto the skirt she'd made two days before. She'd baked the pieces of clay yesterday, so they were cured now. On her break at work, between bussing tables, she had poked small holes into the tops of the clay pieces to make it easier to sew them on. Still, she hoped they looked like teeth. Who would the Tooth Fairy be without teeth?

Her notes from sociology class were stacked on either side of the old sewing machine she'd gotten from her grandmother, her mémé. The most recent notes were opened in front of her, just next to the sewing machine.

She read them as she sewed. She'd gotten home from class just after 10, cleaned up the mess from the dinner she hadn't been home to eat, and then began sewing. MercyMe's *I Can Only Imagine* played in the background as she worked. She hadn't even noticed the time and probably wouldn't until she was done with this part of the project. That was okay, though. It wasn't for her anyways. Her daughter wanted to be the Tooth Fairy for Halloween. And homemade costumes were better.

—   —   —

2013. 10:45 at night. I'm in bed and I hear the front door close downstairs. I know who it is because I know her schedule, so I rush down to the kitchen. Her back is turned from me, she's wearing a cardigan with her black, curly hair up in a bun to keep it out of her face. She probably put it up around noon. She's wearing my winter boots, we've been the same size now for years even though I stand 3 inches taller than her at 5 foot 5. Her bags- filled with books, papers, her work laptop and her school laptop- are sitting on the kitchen island. She's sorting through the bags of food and I can smell the grease from across the room.

"How was class?" I ask her.

"It was good. Busy, I'll tell you in a minute. What'd you ask for, again?" She responds.

I make my way over and grab the fries and milkshake I'd ordered. She picked it all up on her way home. My brothers are already sitting at the island eating. I sit down next to them, picking up fries as I turn to face her. Like usual, we all sit at the island on one side while she stands on the other side. We eat as she tells us about

her day. Getting our youngest brother- who is asleep upstairs- ready this morning, then work, stopping at her internship on her lunch break, and finally class in the evening. We respond with similar summaries of our days. And we chat like this for about thirty minutes before each of us slowly makes our way back up to bed. Starting, of course, with me and my brother who are both in our low teens. She tells me- years later- that she never slept right after these conversations, which were a *very*common occurrence, but instead would clean, do homework, or do regular work. She was always working overtime, at work, at home, at school.

—   —   —

2021. My mother was a single mother from the time I was 4. She always worked full time and yet she always made the time to care for her kids. She was always there to cook dinner and when she wasn't, she'd prepare food and leave it in the fridge for my older siblings to reheat. I never went without, none of my siblings ever went without. And she always thanked God.

Even now, sitting down to interview her for this project, she reminds me to thank God. Her diplomas, one from her Bachelor's degree- which she got when I was still young enough to trick or treat- and the other from her Master's degree, which she got when I was old enough to stay up past 10, sit on the shelves above her desk. We sit at her desk while we speak, as I ask my questions and as she gives her answers. We've just finished dinner. She made pasta and made the separate meal of gluten free pasta for her and I to split (I inherited Celiac from her, and she will always feel bad for this.

Gluten free cookies that she bought me sit next to me as I write this, I did not ask for them. I got home one day and she'd set them on my bed as a small surprise, though she does this at least once a month.). She cooks, even now, every single night. Or... most nights. I've convinced her over the years that she doesn't have to cook for her children every night, that as adults (or teenagers) we won't starve. She still isn't fully convinced, and really will only skip cooking if there are leftovers from something she'd made the night before still sitting in the fridge. Though there usually aren't.

And she still sews. She altered some pants for me just earlier this month. I bought them because they were on sale, couldn't try them on because the dressing rooms were closed, and when I got home, she asked to see them on. She revels in everything her children do, even to the point of still asking to see all the clothes I buy myself. So, I tried them on and they were slightly loose. She had me give them to her and she took in the waist. She also sews as a hobby, she spends most weekends in her sewing room (which is our former formal dining room). For Christmas each year, most everyone gets a homemade present (homemade is better). This year it was blankets. Last year it was stockings- custom made with our names embroidered on the cuff- to hang over the fireplace.

She also still works. Full time. But most of us, her children, are grown up now. My youngest brother, who is almost a decade younger than I am, is now almost a teenager. And she has remarried since, to my step father.

She's not quite as busy as she once was, and she's

> no longer in school. But she still is every last bit the hardworking mother she has always been, perhaps too much, for her own sake. She still loves everything her children do. And her children still love everything that she does.

Madelyn communicates a very clear angle about her story subject, which is captured in the final paragraph: her mother is a remarkably hardworking, devoted mother. What is particularly effective in this example is Madelyn's use of scope. While most character profiles revolve around a single encounter with the story subject, Madelyn has years to draw from. Yet in order to fully "show" her mother (we'll get into showing versus telling in the next chapter), Madelyn doesn't tell her mother's life story, but instead, she focuses on a couple of rich and vivid scenes that fully immerse us in narrative and bring her mother to life on the page. This is the power and beauty of well-crafted narrative scope.

In the next chapter, we'll go into more detail about the interconnectedness of angle and scope with showing versus telling. Angle and scope, with the help of showing (and telling when necessary), are instrumental in the craft of narrative journalism.

Media Attributions

5. Character

"To develop a character—whether a kid whose trip to the wrong place triggered social change or an important historical figure—we do two things: explore the subject's complexity, and present that complexity through a series of revelations"
– Stanley Nelson

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this chapter are as follows:

· To develop a better understanding of the character profile and the function of character as a literary technique in narrative journalism.
· To appreciate the difference between "showing" and "telling," while developing a deeper understanding of when and how to use the techniques.

While chapter 3 went into detail about how we describe the element of "character," there is still the matter of how we use it in narrative journalism. For me, the best investigation of this element is through the character sketch or character profile. The character profile is one of the most common and

compelling forms of narrative journalism, and it should be no surprise, as human subjects are inherently interesting to us as humans.

Some of the best character profiles I've ever come across, which are really character profile vignettes, are artfully curated and crafted by photographer, Brandon Stanton, in his Humans of New York series.

📽 *One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:* https://oer.pressbooks.pub/narrativejournalism/?p=31#oembed-1

Brandon began his project photographing random strangers on the streets of New York, and posting these portraits with a short quote or two. The underlying concept: All humans have a story to tell. This concept developed into what is now an international blog with numerous bestselling books.

The reason I find these character profiles so compelling and instructive is that they rely entirely on the element of character. These profiles are minimalistic: originally, they contained a single image and a quote from the subject. That was all. All of the human subjects were encapsulated in the following: physical features, surrounding, content of the quote, and manner of speaking. This is the epitome of "showing" as a narrative device.

Showing vs. Telling

The beauty of the "Humans of New York" form lies in its reliance on "showing" instead of "telling." While the photographer chooses the photo and the quote to include, the subject is

clearly and plainly presented. And yet we come away with this deep and profound understanding of who these people are, their "essence," and we come away with a deeper connection to our shared humanity.

Let's take a look at a couple of student examples:

Example 1

Matthew Johnson

Professor Wielechowski

Composition 310

23 January 2021

"For me, the software development path stems back to eighth grade, actually. I always wanted to make a video game. [I] was interested in game development and seeing what went into that field of work. So, I would be at home looking up game design, trying to see how to make characters, add textures to characters, animations to characters, and then I [finally] asked myself: "How is this character going to know to move?" That introduced me to code right then and there. I liked just being able to type something out on a screen, and then watch it do as I expected."

While Matt simply presents an image and quote from the story subject, not only do we understand what motivates this story subject, but we also get some backstory, and we come away feeling a connection to the story subject. This is effective storytelling.

Zeena Whayeb

Project 1A

"With baking, there's a lot of science to it. In America, they don't do this enough, but you're technically supposed to go by weight. When we made the dough here, everything was weighed. When I first started, it used to be by cups, and that's more of a volume kind of thing. And let me tell you, that's very inconsistent because how you scoop up flour can affect your end product. So, I switched over to weight, and I felt it's a lot easier, too, because now when I develop a new cookie recipe, I can just decrease the weight—the grams of flour—and up something else. There has to be a balance between your dry ingredients and wet ingredients, too."

While Zeena presents the story subject almost matter-of-factly with this quote about baking, there is much more communicated through this short profile. There is an allusion to personal history, and there is humor and passion tucked neatly within the quote. Like in the previous example, we come away feeling connected to this story subject.

In both examples, there is no commentary from the authors of the text, and so, the only techniques available are to "show," and to show exclusively through your story subject—their physical attributes, their facial expressions, their fashion, their environment, their words, their manner of speaking. This is a lesson in purely "showing" your story subject. Concrete detail, rich description, scene, and dialogue are all terrific techniques used in order to "show" your story subject in longer pieces of narrative journalism.

With all of the focus on "showing," this is not to say that the technique of "telling" should be avoided, because it too has its place within narrative journalism. At times "telling" can get us from point A to B, while "showing" should be used to fully immerse us in character and scene. When considering how much "telling" to include, we must be discerning with amount, as too much of it can feel overbearing and patronizing to your reader.

Character Profiles:

A traditional character sketch or profile should achieve the same result as a Humans of New York profile. However, the narrative journalist has more time and opportunity to "show" their subject. Considerations of angle and scope will come into play (see chapter 4), but more than that, the narrative journalist must decide just how to show their subject (and what balance of "telling" might be required). How do we tap into someone's essence? Yes, physical attributes and fashion and visual cues are very telling about a person. Behavior, mannerisms, ways of speaking, are also very telling. A person's relationships, their backstory, their interests, passions, talents, etc., they all matter

and mean something about who a person is. So what does a narrative journalist choose?

Character Profiles are not biographies, and the more backstory and history you try to pack into a profile, often the more distance we feel from the subject. Conversely, the smaller the narrative scope of the profile, the more focused our "viewing" of the subject is, often the sharper that focus is. And the effect of this is the story subjects come to life off of the page, as the following student examples illustrate:

Example 1

Matthew Johnson

Professor Wielechowski

Composition 310

27 January 2021

The Software Developer with No Degree

Raymond had an interest in video game development since the eighth grade. He would race home from school, eager to open up Blender, and begin crafting 3D models of weapons and characters with the television on silent in the background. As a child he took great pleasure in playing a variety of games, from platformers like *Sonic the Hedgehog*, action like *Grand Theft Auto*, and almost the entire *Call of Duty* franchise, so developing games seemed like the next best thing. He even planned on attending college for 3D modeling and design so that one day, he could see his titles on the store shelves. However,

Raymond's dream of creating his childhood delicacies for the masses came to a screeching halt as he asked himself "How will these characters know to move?" An answer he would find in the field of software development.

You see, video game characters cannot move without code, and coding was an exercise that intrigued Raymond. His new favorite hobby in high school was to open up Visual Studio, and create basic programs and websites, of course, with the television on silent in the background. He enjoyed solving technical problems, so much so that he even said "I liked just being able to type something out on a screen, and then watch it do as I expected," as if he was a master of the trade. One could say that Raymond bit off a bit more than he could chew, as after he graduated from high school, he attended College of Creative Studies (CCS) to get his hands dirty in another skill, graphic design.

While he intended to learn another skill to be versatile in the job market, Raymond found his stay at CCS to be bland and unfulfilling. He created posters, critiqued typography, and made flyers. Although he knew his efforts were solving problems, he wasn't solving the technical problems that he had a passion for. Not to mention, CCS was expensive, costing $25,000 annually for tuition and housing. He may have had a scholarship to go there, but from every angle, Raymond could tell that path he'd chosen wasn't worth the money. And so, humbled by his own ambitions, he came back home, got a part-time job at Chipotle, and resumed coding.

Despite the fact that Raymond was not in a position to return to school, he never thought that lacking a college degree would prevent him from getting a job in software development. "Quite frankly we're living in a time where more fields are being considered as trades and employers are worried about moving fast and just hiring the right person to get the job done. [This] took a great deal of stress off of me when I decided to [take] the route that I did."

Nevertheless, Raymond spent the majority of his free time building a portfolio that would allow him to stand out from his collegiate peers. Over the span of nine months, he taught himself to code, and created a variety of websites (which utilized relevant technologies, and demonstrated his knowledge of data structures and algorithms). At one point, Raymond even considered traveling down to Utah to enroll in DevMountain, just to gain some type of certificate, but due to his wealth of knowledge in the subject, the teaching assistant denied him access to the bootcamp.

While Raymond exhibited the technical skills necessary to get a job as a software developer, interpersonal skills were just as important, and his past experiences lent a hand establishing those. During Raymond's time at Chipotle, he was promoted from a team member to a kitchen manager, which improved his leadership skills. "Once I became a kitchen manager, I learned how to work under pressure, and how to mentor my peers. In software development, being able to communicate why one solution is better in the long term than another is a key skill to have." Additionally, Raymond's various jobs as a

landscaper helped him to serve customers in the best, and most efficient way possible. "When you're coding, you're not only considering application speed, but also trying to ensure that the client gets the most functionality out of your program."

With a combination of technical and soft skills, the only thing Raymond had to do was get an interview. After traveling to multiple networking events, and getting in touch with several hiring managers, he finally received a call from Red Ventures Detroit. Due to his outstanding portfolio of work, and his desirable interpersonal nature, Raymond was hired on as a software developer with a starting salary of $85,000. At last, he acquired his dream job.

In his new position, Raymond gets satisfaction from the instant feedback he gets while building applications. He can solve complex problems in a few keystrokes, without having to carry the intense weight that similar engineers face on a daily basis. "On a bad day, I can afford to be messy where other types of engineers can't. I have the luxury to just mash random buttons into my terminal, and run test cases against a set of sample data to see if I get the expected outcome." However, Raymond understands that there is great responsibility required when completing his job, as he deals with sensitive customer information. "There's a great deal of trust [the customer] is making with our company and that trust is not meant to be broken."

Upon inquiring if there was anything Raymond would have done differently, he said no. He still wishes to pursue a degree in Computer Science, just to have

the knowledge. However, Raymond emphasized the importance of specializing in one thing, and being the best at it. He says, "Instead of being a jack-of-all-trades, master of nothing, you should take one skill that you enjoy, master it, and that will propel you in your career." Following this advice is what got him as far as he has today.

Currently, Raymond works at StockX, ensuring that people are able to get their hands on sought after goods that are authentically verified.

Matt paints a broader, more detailed picture of the story subject in this traditional character profile, and he relies on a balance of "showing" and "telling." The entire framework of the profile utilizes "telling" and summary as Matt touches on some major points in Raymond's life, but this interspersed with direct quotes brings us into the narrative, as well as bringing Raymond to life on the page.

The next example by Zeena Whayeb takes a slightly different approach:

Example 2

Zeena Whayeb

Professor Wielechowski

Project 1B

01 February 2021

Sara Treats You Batter

I entered the small bakery. A caramel latte scent diffused from a short cylindrical candle into the warm, cozy shop; the soft ambiance complemented the sweetness in the air. An aesthetic arrangement of cookies lined the counter, from the famous s'mores to the classic chocolate chip. I glanced to my left and was met with the large painted sign of the Detroit skyline atop a cookie. Above this logo were the words "Treat You Batter," a clever play on words Sara came up with from the Shawn Mendez song, "Treat You Better."

I met Sara's oldest brother, Mohammed, behind the cash register and ordered their newest drink: the iced mocha latte. Sara then entered through the back double doors and stood behind the curved glass counter, wearing her blue mask. Her floral hijab wrapped around her head neatly, and her eyes happily greeted me as she immediately went to make the iced coffee.

"I want you to tell me your honest opinion," she requested as she began mixing and pouring. Her second older brother, Ali, then came to help make the coffee, while she took a new customer's order. "I told her to tell us her honest feedback," she said to her brother as she moved away. Ali nodded in understanding and finished preparing the drink. After handing it to me, the pair of siblings watched me carefully as I took a sip. The flow of the iced coffee, with a tinge of bitterness and sweetness, made me sigh happily.

"It's really good," I reported honestly. "I like it better than the caramel one."

"Would you say it needs more sugar? My friend tasted it yesterday and told me to make it sweeter," Ali said with uncertainty.

"No, no, I think it's good."

The siblings then spoke hastily about whether they should add more sugar. Sara and I seemed to like the way it was, but her brother was the perfectionist of the family. Sara told me that he spent a month perfecting their cuban latte drink.

"But you can taste the coffee," Ali said, still unsure. Sara immediately reminded, "But it's an iced coffee . You're supposed to taste it."

"People don't really like that," he shrugged.

"There are those who do." Sara countered, and I nodded, sipping the coffee happily under my mask.

A few weeks ago, I was introduced to the bakery's chocolate chip cookies. From then on, I became their regular customer. The business has been growing in popularity, and they've received coverage from multiple media stations. One morning, I took the opportunity to sit down with Sara and learn more about her and her family's business. She was reluctant to tell me about herself because she felt her older brother, Ali, had more of a story to tell. However, I assured her that she had one to tell, as well.

Sara, a Muslim woman in her late 20s, has always liked baking, and she always sought new recipes to try. Soon, she began to make her own recipes. She explains,

"I remember always trying to figure out a really good chocolate chip recipe. I tried a bunch [of times] with brown butter, soft butter, whatever butter. Then, I found one that was closest to what I wanted it to be." Her younger brother, Abdullah, shared the idea of selling their cookies on Instagram. When the demand for their cookies continued to grow, the four siblings found it difficult to bake and carry out the orders in their small kitchen. This is when they took the grand step to open up their own bakery.

However, this was no easy decision for Sara. At the time, she had been working at Volkswagen for six years, and she was definitely no risk-taker, describing herself as "a play-it-safe, stay-in-my-lane person." The decision did eventually become clear when she noticed herself losing motivation, forcing her to contemplate if the corporate life was truly for her. "I like to say that I went through some type of quarter life crisis," she reminisces. "I really loved [working there] initially because it's a great place to work, but when you work corporate, your goal is to be promoted or find a better job and eventually work towards retirement. During my fourth year, I was getting very lethargic with the work, and for me, I feel really guilty if I'm not motivated to do something." She realized she will not be able to continue this type of work until her senior years, explaining that if this isn't the life for her, then "what's my purpose of just kind of doing it?"

After Sara was on board, the siblings began looking for several places, and they decided on a space Sara describes as a "white box," meaning it was completely empty of any design or interior walls: "There was

nothing here," she says, gesturing to the wall separating the front from the kitchen. "You build these walls, and you design everything," This complete control over the customization of the interior space attracted their attention, and they got the space.

Their excitement was immeasurable. However, the work necessary to open one's business always turns out to be more than anticipated. Sara encountered a major issue merely a few days before the bakery's grand opening: she couldn't bake the cookies. "I've never used a commercial oven before," Sara explains. "We got these trays that were basically almost end to end within the oven. A week before, I would test bake, and I kept testing every day. Every time, the cookies look fine from the outside, but when you break it open, it's straight raw." Anxiety settled uncomfortably on the siblings as they tried to figure out the problem. Their main baker, Sara, was at a total loss. Having little time left, they pondered if they should make the cookies at home and then drive them to the shop. However, this idea was quickly dismissed; it simply wasn't feasible.

Sara began researching extensively and stumbled upon a forum that instructed them to use a smaller pan. Having tried everything else, she immediately gave it a try. "The initial tray was too large. So, the circulation of the heat in the oven was not evenly distributed. When we used the half sheet trays, it worked!"

Having overcome this obstacle, Sara and her three brothers finally opened the bakery in early March—a couple of days before COVID-19 caused a lockdown order in Michigan. The rising concern of the pandemic

did not deter the siblings from trudging forward. Sara referenced her brother's words, "My brother said when you go into business, you expect a lot of things, you have to set yourself up for failure and disappointment." She then continues jokingly, "But you set yourself up for a lot of things, you just never expected a pandemic to hit…"

The family noticed the gradual decline of their customers, and when the cases surged, they closed their storefront. Instead, they focused on deliveries. Weeks later, they changed to curbside pickup. Weeks after that, they opened the storefront back up. However, Sara explains that those weeks after the opening were crucial to building a customer base and utilizing the hype from the community. Because the initial hype was cut short, building a customer base and spreading the word took longer than it usually would. "It's fine, though," Sara says, showing her resilience, "We've learned a lot through the process, and adapting is the biggest thing."

Maintaining the bakery has been a lot of work, and Sara admits to me that it can sometimes be exhausting. However, she finds it very fulfilling and expresses her joy at working with her family: "I think it's easier for sure to work with family. When there are any arguments, you can be more straight up about things." In the bakery, Sara takes on the baking portion and most of the financial aspect, where she utilizes her math degree from the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Though working at the bakery does take up most of her time, Sara enjoys certain hobbies outside of

her work. Most notably, she loves to read—her favorite book is *The Outsiders* —and watch sports.

For the present, Sara wants to continue to develop and experiment with new menu items. She is currently working on cakes and other cookie recipes. In the future, she hopes to expand the bakery and possibly pursue a master's degree in math.

Rather than tell us about the story subject, Zeena immediately immerses us in scene. Through the use of sensory detail, dialogue, and her presence within the narrative, we get to experience the bakery and Zeena's interaction with Sara from the very beginning. This drives the narrative and the character profile. Like Matt, Zeena does rely on the technique of "telling" and summary when we get into the backstory of the story subject and her journey to where she is today. This combination and balance can be extremely effective.

Let's take a look at one final student example, one that I've chosen because of the strategies of characterization:

Example 3

Patrick Masell

Prof. Benjamin Wielechowski

COMP 310-001

22 Sept. 2019

Essence and Anguish

The interview has come to an end. I turn off the recorder and she slumps back in her chair, finally relaxed. She takes hold of her large, black-framed eyeglasses and with a smooth gesture of her slender, delicate hand adjusts them in a fashion that reminds me of a librarian. We pause and take in the sounds of bustle during the mid-day rush that shuffles past the modest coffeehouse. Things hadn't gone smoothly. The coffeehouse had gotten crowded and noisy, the patio wasn't much better, and I often failed to keep the conversation flowing. But it was over. I was no longer interviewing Madison; now I was catching up with an old colleague, Maddie. It is here, I'm told, once the notebook is closed and your subject is no longer nervously twisting the sleeve around her coffee cup, is where you've reached the center of the onion. This is where the best revelation, the inner truth often emerges. What would Maddie's inner truth be?

"Do you see those two guys there?" she draws my attention to a pair of figures across the street. "The one with the dreads does my piercings." It's clear that Maddie keeps her piercer busy since she had gauges in both ears and a septum piercing. She remarks that the tattoo shop where she gets her work done is nearby. I ask her how many tattoos she has, but she has lost count. She then points out her latest piece, a single word in bold, black ink poking through an exposed hole in her distressed jeans. It reads: ESSENCE. She tells me that it has a mate printed on her other leg: ANGUISH, but it's hidden beneath the denim. "It means

that a person is born to be a certain way," Maddie explains. A person's essential traits, their defining characteristics are determined before their birth and the individual should adhere to that function to be satisfied.

"I was always considered a "college bound kid" in high school," Maddie informs me. She attended Whitmer High School in Toledo. "Honors and AP classes, graduated ranked 12th in my class..." Good grades came naturally to her, as did athletics and friendships. She was also engaged in extracurricular activities as well. Maddie seemed tailor made to pursue higher learning both as a student and a teacher. This isn't surprising given the fact that she came from a family that valued higher education; many of them were teachers, after all. Plato would probably argue that fate willed Maddie into being accepted into University of Toledo for a degree in secondary education and, given her pedigree, it would be hard to argue against him.

"Anguish is choice," Maddie explains to me. "People are a balance of both." She goes on to tell me about philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, whom she discovered in an unorthodox way. Maddie laughs and says, "Man, I'm glad we aren't recording this!" before confessing that she discovered Sartre because that was the stage name taken by her favorite adult actress, Charlotte Sartre. Sartre, the French philosopher and not the porn star, believed "being precedes essence", or we create meaning; it is not assigned for us. Choice is anguish due to the implication that without a preordained

existence, nothing is for certain. We are free and terrifyingly so.

Maddie had cried on orientation day, but she did not know why. After a semester at Toledo, she transferred to Michigan State and there she had the opportunity to teach. Instead of it being her calling, she struggled to find meaning in the work. She enjoyed it, but it did not allow her to be herself. Maddie was attempting to live up to the expectations that others had set instead of her own. As Sartre would describe it, she was living in 'bad faith;' caught between essence and anguish. Much to the consternation of those who knew Maddie best, she dropped out of school entirely.

"I think people find me intimidating, but I only say that because its what I've been told from a few people. I think of myself as very sheepish and easily skittish and don't think I have much of a strong presence at all." I can confirm that Maddie can be intimidating at first, judging from personal experience. On the other hand, I would argue she has a much stronger presence than she would have you believe. Being around Maddie, one tends to notice the heads turning in her direction. Tall and willowy with a fair complexion, Maddie invokes the image of 'Hollywood Gothic'; something like Elizabeth Taylor-by-way-of-Morticia Adams. I've always known her to be meticulous about her appearance. It occurs to me during the interview that it's a necessity; her appearance acts like a business card. It's part of her profession. Today she is more casual, but I still get the sense that there is something deliberate in the way she pulls her raven-hued hair into a haphazard bun. After dropping out of MSU, Maddie enrolled into the

Estheticians program. An esthetician performs cosmetic skin treatments including facials, hair removal, surface level massages and a plethora of similar treatments.

Maddie's first exposure to esthetics came back at university when friends visited her in her dorm room to get their eyebrows waxed. She took an interest in skin care and beauty; helping others take better care of themselves keyed into her strong maternal instincts. "Finding a career field that challenges me as well as excites me was incredible," she recalls. Prior to dropping out of school, however, she didn't consider this passion to be a worthy profession. It took recognition of this passion from others to convince Maddie that learning to become an esthetician could be a valid career path. "Know thyself," the Greek aphorism goes. Sartre would call it 'living authentically.' To do so, Maddie would have to reject the belief that her passion wasn't serious enough. **"**There might not always be people that will take you seriously," she explains, "but if you take yourself seriously others will follow suit."

Maddie is in a period of flux, with many pieces of her life shifting. We speak at length about her concerns. She has a state licensing exam to take for esthetics, she might carry the same gene that caused her mother's breast cancer, and she recently broke up with her girlfriend. On the upside, her older brother will be getting married soon. She is planning on taking David as her plus one to the wedding. David is Maddie's best friend, perhaps more than that. She tells me that when looking at him she sees, "everything I want to be." She

confesses that part of her hopes to rekindle a past romance, but she has her trepidations. They had tried dating several times, each leading to failure. Most recently, things dissolved due to strong, opposing opinions they have developed over the time they had known each other. Opinions neither could acquiesce to the other. She pauses briefly when discussing this and stares at the table; brow furrowed. Her pained expression tells me she's reliving a raw memory. I wish to console her, but she has no need for tired platitudes. Maddie is at a crossroads. She is not meant to be an esthetician, she is not meant to be with David. Essence is an illusion and all she has is the burden of choice that weighs upon her countenance. Anguish. But there is beauty to be found in anguish. Since nothing is pre-ordained, she is free to define her life; to live authentically.

Our meeting had ended. She collects her things, I tuck my notebook under my arm, we embrace briefly, I watch her walk away. I had known Maddie for over a year and for the past two hours she answered every question I thought to ask. However, I hadn't really begun to understand her until she casually discussed her tattoos. In these brief moments, I feel as though I better understand myself, as well. I'm sad to see her go, but I'm thankful for the time we've shared. It's okay to be sad. It means our time together had value. I've defined my truth and I know now where to find the truth behind Madison Reynolds. It resides in the space between essence and anguish.

Like the two previous examples, Patrick utilizes a balance of

"showing" and "telling." The attention to detail, the description, and the natural, compelling dialogue put us front and center in the story. The commentary and summary help us move throughout the profile and give the story subject more depth. The angle is communicated through repetition of 'essence' and 'anguish,' with the title and the symbol of the tattoos acting as very effective literary devices. The characterization and the structure of the profile are worth dwelling on. Patrick focuses on what might be considered mundane details, like how Maddie twists the sleeve around her coffee cup when she's nervous, and within these details we learn a world about Maddie. The physical description and the exchange of dialogue are also extremely effective in bringing Maddie off of the page. Patrick also does something very clever here with the structure of the profile. Instead of organizing the profile around the interview, this profile begins at the end of the interview where we get to really "see" the story subject. The information gained through the interview is then revealed throughout in those moments of commentary. This has everything to do with narrative design, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 7.

Media Attributions

6. Setting

"I think of the setting as a horizontal plane and the individual as a vertical plane. The line created by their intersection—there lies the story."
– Tom Wolfe

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this chapter are as follows:

- To further explore narrative journalism through the element of fiction, setting, and the place-profile.
- To better understand the function of setting and its impact as a literary device in immersive storytelling.

Place-based journalism, or place profiles, shares similarities with the character profile. One of the big differences is the number and the prominence of the featured characters. Whereas a character profile is driven by a single (or perhaps a few) character(s), a place profile explores the issues of a place, and the people who are involved in a place, and so this follows a more traditional, longer piece of narrative journalism that relies

on more immersive reporting and involves a variety of people and places.

For beginning narrative journalists, a piece of place-based journalism achieves two things: first, it allows a journalist to immerse themselves in "place," and, as described earlier, primary research is a crucial skill to develop. Second, place is grounding, and this allows the story to emerge from a place, as there are infinite opportunities for storytelling in every single place. All that being said, looking at a few examples might help to solidify the form while inspiring ideas for future pieces of place-based journalism.

Let's take a look a few student examples to help us better understand how 'place' functions within narrative journalism and the ways in which these student journalists approach their topics:

Place Profile:

Example 1

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: *https://oer.pressbooks.pub/narrativejournalism/?p=33#oembed-1*

By: Allen Dillard

Allen's entire mini documentary revolves around a place known as the WIG. Through this focus on place, we get to meet the people involved in its development and the ways in which it has impacted the skating community and the surrounding neighborhood. The anchor of the entire piece is, of course, the place, and this allows Allen to fully immerse us in place, in this case, through visual imagery.

The next student example takes a different approach, not only in content and tone, but in presentation.

Example 2

🎵 *One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oer.pressbooks.pub/ narrativejournalism/?p=33#audio-33-1*

By: Matthew Johnson

Matt weaves together personal narrative, interviews, scientific studies, audio clips, sound effects, and more to create a very dynamic podcast about video game addiction. Since the

gaming world is virtual, this piece of place-based journalism does not have a concrete geographical location like the previous example, and yet, there is a culture and community that unites the characters within the story and those impacted by the story subject. Though the use of first person narration, along with the detailed interviews and audio clips, we feel completely immersed in 'place' and in 'story,' while Matt takes us through the highs and lows of video game addiction.

7. Plot

"Narrative is chronology: This happens, that happens, the other thing happens, and then something else happens. [....] 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."
– Jon Franklin

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this chapter are as follows:

- To explore the relationship between the element of plot and the concept of "narrative design."
- To better understand how genre impacts plot and structure and how narrative journalists can leverage this element of fiction across genres.

While plot is a very instructive and accessible term as far as literary elements are concerned, I prefer the term narrative design for narrative journalism, as it prioritizes craft over storyline. And, as mentioned in Chapter 3, we cannot manipulate the storyline when writing nonfiction. We cannot invent events and we cannot delete events. We cannot

rearrange how events occurred in a piece of nonfiction (as this creates monumental ethical violations). We can, however, play around with how the story is revealed to our reader, and this is why the element of plot is such a crucial and effective tool in narrative journalism.

Often considered to be the "quintessential" text of narrative journalism, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* catalogs the murders of the Clutter family, a wealthy farming family located in a small town in Holcomb, Kansas, and while these stories of unnecessary violence were not new, the storytelling techniques Capote incorporated were rarely seen before in nonfiction. From dozens of hours of primary research, mainly interviews with the convicted murderers, Capote recreated the days leading up to, the night of the murders, and the weeks and months and years that followed including the manhunt, arrest, conviction, and eventual execution of the two convicted. Capote moves around in time, from before the murders, chronicling the movements of the Clutter family and the two would-be murderers, and then brings the stories together in a way that reads like fiction. The story is in and of itself "stranger than fiction," but Capote manages something far greater than a front page news story with his mastery of narrative design.

Narrative Design:

Narrative design has everything to do with the structure of a story. Yes, plot is involved with what happens first, second, third, etc., and how all of the events impact and influence one another, but narrative design takes a step back from the story in order to fully consider the reader experience (and not just what the characters are doing). What arrangement of the narrative will most powerfully impact the audience, and how best can we communicate our angle? For the most effective

narrative design, full consideration must be given to the reader and the reading experience. Let's take a look at a student example to analyze just how narrative design can be used to affect that reader experience:

Jenna begins this mini-documentary focusing in on her protagonist as she completes a Covid check-in before attending practice. This is an expert narrative device, as we are immediately immersed. The next sequence in the film provides national context for the covid pandemic. Then the focus returns to the protagonist and her experience and perseverance through the pandemic. The design choices to include multiple interviews that contrast the protagonist's experience only further emphasize the angle of the story.

Narrative Design and Genre:

In order to highlight the power of narrative design and the opportunities we have as journalists, let's compare and contrast a few different **genres**: narrative journalism, news journalism, and scriptwriting/graphica. Each require a specific design or structure in order to adhere to the conventions of the **genre**. Because of these differences, it is important to dissect the design to see how each genre works on a structural level.

- Narrative Journalism relies heavily on the elements of fiction, and so, there is added attention to character, setting, plot, point of view, and of course, theme. See how these elements play out in the following example:

Example

> 🎵 *One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:* https://oer.pressbooks.pub/narrativejournalism/?p=35#audio-35-1

By: Autumn Tashman

Autumn begins by with a short personal narrative, which engages us through the elements of character and point of view, as this piece is driven by first person narration. Autumn also explores this "alternate reality" of social media and the impact this "place" has on people who visit. The mix of personal narrative and interviews, complemented by important secondary research, creates for a thorough and compelling expose about the effects of social media.

- Traditional Journalism conversely, follows a very specific form. The structure must follow the inverted pyramid, which provides the entire story in the headline and lede of

the article.

"The Lead": The most important info
Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?
Approximately 30 words (1-2 thin paragraphs)
May include a "hook" (provocative quote or question)

"The Body": The crucial info
Argument, Controversy, Story, Issue
Evidence, background, details, logic, etc.
Quotes, photos, video, and audio that
support, dispute, expand the topic

"The Tail": extra info
Interesting/Related items
May include extra context
In blogs, columns, and
other editorials: the
assessment of the
journalist

The inverted pyramid structure typical of news journalism.

The lede should answer the who, what, where, when, how, and why. This plot structure relies on revealing the most information possible in the least amount of time, prioritizing the information rather than the story. Narrative journalism, conversely, does almost the exact opposite: story over information. See this student example by Autumn Tashman, one that focuses on the same content matter as the previous example, but look at how formulaic the structure is, from the headline, to the subheadline, to the lede (all telling the full story), then into the body of detail within the story, and finally the tail:

Example

The Effect Upward Comparisons Have on Social Media Users

Comparisons amongst users on social

media who display the highlights of their lives creates damaging effects on users.

(Image would usually be featured in this location with caption)

Autumn Tashman

When users log onto their social media platforms, they face comparing themselves—based on human nature for self-evaluation—with people who showcase the highlights of their lives. This poses risk for users to feel worse about themselves and lead to depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety.

The Theory of Social Comparison that has been proposed by psychologist Leon Festinger states that it is "the proposition that people evaluate their abilities and attitudes in relation to those of others in a process that plays a significant role in self-image and subjective well-being" according to the APA Dictionary. It is also said that the three types of comparisons are upward, downward, and lateral, where upward comparisons are often seen in social media when people compare themselves with someone perceived to be better than him or her based on what this person showcases on their pages.

According to a study published in 2016 where 881 female college students were evaluated, it was found that "the more time teens spent on social media, the more they compared their bodies with those of their friends. Consequently, they felt more negative about

their bodies." Similarly, a study published in 2019 that investigated the effect "Instagram vs Reality" images had on 305 women found that body dissatisfaction increased when looking at the "ideal" images. While social media may not be to blame for human nature and their unavoidable nature to compare oneself with others for self-evaluation, what social media does is exacerbate this dilemma and create expectations for themselves where the baseline of these expectations is skewed to attract others.

The apps TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook are recommended for people ages 12 and up. For young adolescents, the ages of 12 to 13 are the years where body dysmorphia is first detected, according to a Help Guide article. It's also said in this article that a symptom for body dysmorphia is comparing oneself negatively to others, and by the Theory of Social Comparison, humans have this sort of inevitability to take part in evaluating their own worth by comparing themselves with others, and social media platforms are just one place where this can be achieved. More specifically, well over the majority of people who act as the basis of comparison have been edited in a way that would make themselves look better online, through the photoshop app Facetune (71% of people say they won't post a picture online without somehow touching it up). These 12-13 year old children have access to these types of photos that are intended to be appealing, which can lead to upward comparisons which in turn lead to low self-esteem and even symptoms of depression.

In a TedTalk, Bea Arthur, founder and CEO of The

Difference, a company that provides on-demand access to therapy, addressed the possible effects that Facebook has on people. She says, "Facebook started out as a way to keep up with people that you like, but it's slowly turned into a way to keep up with people that you now kind of resent." Because people have a tendency to compare themselves to whom they are seeing online (that this friend just got married, or that friend just landed a new job at a Fortune 500 company for example), it creates this negative space where people begin to downplay their own successes based on the ones people choose to showcase online.

Anthropologist Bob Deutsch believes that "The very nature of [social media] causes all of us to be fake," and he supports this claim by saying "...With the right filter and snappy status update can project an image of a life far better than the one we authentically experience." Jessica Stillman agrees with Deutsch's verdict, and backs up her claim that "The more miserable you are, the happier your social media posts" by using a Twitter thread showing that social media harbors people's dark sides in life. For example, one woman posted a joyful-looking picture of her holding her smiling baby with the caption, "This photo is of me and my daughter (now almost 9) as a baby. I hadn't slept in months and had RAGING postpartum anxiety. I loved her but mostly wanted to run away. I was tired and angry and scared all the time." What's seen on social media is only what people want others to see, and in reality, viewers are missing out on half, if not more, of the full story.

Doctor Steve Rose reported that "social media use activates the same reward centers in the brain

triggered by addictions to chemical compounds." Every "like" that a person gets triggers the brain's reward center, creating this addictive effect to receive likes, and as a result, people will do what it takes to feel the reward of earning more likes on their posts. For many, this involves using photoshop, retaking a selfie dozens of times, finding the perfect lighting and angle for a pose, and more. While it's essentially impossible to prevent comparisons among users, understanding that what is advertised on social media most likely isn't the real-deal is a first step in canceling out the negative effects that may come with self-evaluation through others.

Sources:

How social media is increasing a person's exposure to body shaming and body image (indiatimes.com)

Rising dysmorphia among adolescents : A cause for concern (nih.gov)

Statistics — Megan Meier Foundation

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) – HelpGuide.org

Comparison culture: impact of Instagram on our self-esteem (stylist.co.uk)

Social Comparison Therapy in Social Media | Newport Academy

'I Was Obsessed With Facetune': 71% Of People Won't Post A Picture Online Without Photoshopping It – That Needs To Change | Grazia (graziadaily.co.uk)

Gender differences in Mental Health – RAMH

Why Everyone and Everything on Social Media Is Fake (entrepreneur.com)

The More Miserable You Are, the Happier Your Social Media Posts, and This Twitter Thread Proves It | Inc.com

Why We Are Addicted To Social Media: The Psychology of Likes | Steve Rose, PhD social comparison theory – APA Dictionary of Psychology

- Scriptwriting and Graphica doesn't technically fall within the genre of narrative journalism, but it can be extremely insightful in how we negotiate our narrative design. Both forms are very character and scene driven, and so we can learn more about narrative design through exploring this unique format. This format is also more directly connected to fiction than are some of the other formats, and that liberty in craft can also be instructive. When compared to documentary, which is a classic form of narrative journalism, scriptwriting and graphica are more impressionistic, and by this I mean scriptwriters take an event that has happened (rather than while it is happening) and present a version of the event or issue with some form of hindsight. This taps into our sense of meaning, and so as writers, we have to think more deeply about how scene and character can convey meaning outside of a strict chronology of events. Let's take a look at the following example by Autumn Tashman to see how she tackles the same subject matter (effects of social media) through this new format:

Autumn Tashman

Scene 1:

Three best friends, Alyssa, Jasmine, and Alex are hanging out at a sleepover get-together, scrolling through their TikTok feeds before getting ready for bed. Alyssa stumbles across a trending TikTok dance that she's been wanting to do for several days.

Alyssa: You guys have to do this TikTok dance with me! We could totally become famous off of this! We literally just have to stand in one spot and jump around a bit. Then BOOM! People will love us!

Jasmine: Eh, I'll pass on this one. You two go ahead.

Jasmine gives a smile of encouragement to her friends, Alyssa and Alex.

Alex: All right, fine. But Alyssa, if this blows up, I'll hate you forever; you know how bad I am at dancing!

Alyssa: Yeah yeah yeah. Come on!

Alyssa teaches Alex the dance, and they take a couple of tries to perfect it to the best of their abilities. Once they are satisfied, Alyssa uploads it onto her page.

Jasmine: You guys look great in this! You know Alyssa, even though you only have 200 followers, I think this video could be a real hit.

Alyssa: Thanks Jasmine! I hope you're right!

Scene 2:

The next morning, the three girls are asleep, but Alex is rudely awakened by the sound of someone's phone constantly buzzing. She comes to realize that Alyssa's is the one that is making all the rukkus.

Alex: Hey, hey, Alyssa, wake up!

Alyssa: Why, what's wrong?

Alex: Your phone has been dinging for the past 30 minutes, it's driving me crazy!

Alyssa: What?! No way, it must be the video we uploaded, let's check it out.

Alyssa checks her phone to realize that the video of Alex and her dancing has 400k views and 30k likes. Alex pulls out her own phone to look at the uploaded video alongside Alyssa.

Jasmine: Wow, the video actually blew up! I was kinda half-joking when I said that your video would get famous cause I feel like that never happens, but look at that, you go girls! What are the comments saying about it?

Alex: Ummmm... You might not want to look at them Alyssa.

Alyssa: *(Beginning to tear up)* Oh my god. These comments are awful. How could anybody even think to say something so rude?

Jasmine: What are they saying?

Alex: I mean, a lot of them are positive, but there are

a good amount of them that are comparing the two of us. Also, take a look at this one.

Alex hands Jasmine her phone, and Jasmine begins to read one of the comments.

Jasmine: "Why is the girl on the right shaped like that? I don't know what I'd do if I looked like her"... Alyssa, I'm so so sorry. The people commenting these things are so insecure about themselves that they find other people to hate on to make themselves feel better.

Alyssa: Maybe, but that comment alone had over 400 likes. At this point, I don't even know if people are caught up in their own insecurities, or if they genuinely think I'm unattractive. I never should have posted this stupid video.

Alex: Alyssa, don't think like that! You look amazing in the video, and people just live for drama online. I know it's easier said than done, but try not to take these comments to heart.

Alyssa: Yeah... right.

Scene 3:

2 MONTHS LATER

The three best friends facetime each other for Christmas day. While they spend time apart, they are all curious to know what they all got under their trees.

Alex: Merry Christmas girlies! What did you all end up getting under your trees?

Jasmine: Just the usual! some clothes, makeup, and

nail polish. But I also got this super cute new pair of shoes! What about you, Alyssa?

Alyssa: Nice! I've been wanting this new pair of shoes, but I didn't have room to ask for them on my list. I ended up getting this super cool high-end jump rope, some protein powder, a set of weights, and some other little things. I'm so excited to try them out.

Alex: That all sounds great, but Alyssa, it never seemed like you were into the whole sporty-exercise kinda thing. Are you doing this because of what people said on that one video from a while back?

Alyssa: Honestly, that has a lot to do with it. I think it's easier said than done, trying to ignore the hate, and a lot of those comments really got to me. But man, do I hate today's standards.

Jasmine: You could say that again. People expect so much from us, and when we don't fit what people like to see, we get hate. UGH! What a twisted reality.

Alyssa: Yeah, tell me about it.

The first thing you may notice is the change is formatting. The italicized text is **stage direction**, the bold text identifies the characters in scene, and the standard text is the dialogue. This is a specific convention of the scriptwriting **genre**. Looking at the narrative design, you may notice that this form is heavily driven by the narrative storyline, and so Autumn immediately immerses us in scene as we see the three characters explore social media and the negative consequences of something perceived to be innocent and fun. By the end of the script, we feel this dramatic impact that the characters suffer due to the occurrence in Scene 1. This is in part due to the incredible

narrative design.

Media Attributions

- [Inverted-pyramid-in-comprehensive-form](#) © Christopher Schwartz is licensed under a [CC BY-SA (Attribution ShareAlike)](#) license

8. Point of View

"We are trained as journalists to describe action secondhand, through quotes and observation. Skilled narrative writers put the reader there and let her witness it, have the experience, feel it. That's much more powerful than a secondhand version of reality."
– Jack Hart

Point of view is a quirky element of fiction when applied to narrative journalism because of preconceptions. News journalism prides itself on 3rd person objective reporting where there is no hint of a narrator or author telling the story. Fiction plays around with point of view so wildly that we can have a dozen narrators in a single novel. Nonfiction does not have the same freedoms with point of view as does fiction, but thorough research and reporting can give us tremendous

opportunity. It all comes down to how we craft and include our research into a piece of writing. The gold standard for nonfiction is to adhere to the facts of a story, and what our sources experience and say and feel are legitimate facts of the story (if those sources check out of course). For example, if you have an interview that reveals how a character "felt" during an event, you can recreate that scene while commenting on the feelings of the character, as that is authentic to the story.

For example, in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, he puts us in the vehicle of the two murderers as they drive to the Clutter household, and we can listen to their conversations and peer inside their minds. This is possible due to an extraordinary number of interviews with the subjects. In *Random Family*, Adrien Nicole LeBlanc lived on and off with her story subjects, experiencing their lives for almost ten years. When she writes what they thought and felt, she knew them intimately, and conveys those thoughts and feelings using the subject's own words. If your story subject tells you they "felt scared," you can write, "*So and so* felt scared," and that is honest and true reporting, and yet the point of view is now from the story subject rather than you, the narrator and author of the story. These slight shifts in POV are extremely effective in storytelling, but let's look at some student examples to see just how this element can be executed:

Point of View and Genre

- Narrative Journalism is often driven by the 1st person POV (as has been discussed at length in Chapter 5) as the journalist reflects on and recounts personal experience involving the story subject(s). While this is very effective, as Isabel Wilkerson demonstrates masterfully in both *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents,* and *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, as she catalogs her experiences and interactions as she conducts

her research, it is not the only POV available to us. Let's look at this student example to see what we might learn about point of view and genre:
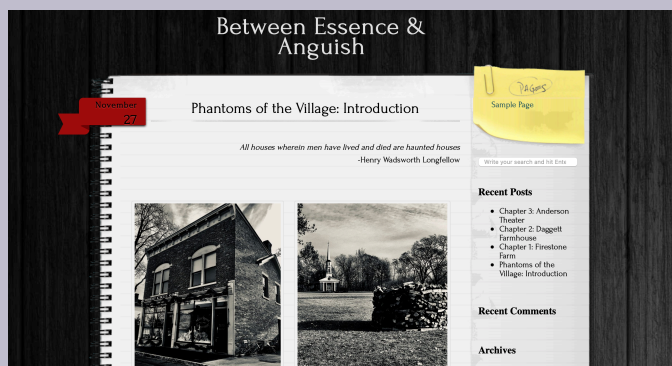
Patrick makes some very creative and sophisticated decisions in terms of point of view, and so this example gives us plenty to explore. The introduction page begins in 1st person, as Patrick invites us into his research process as he explores the hauntings of Greenfield Village. In the fourth paragraph, Patrick introduces Macy, one of the story subjects, and yet, it is as if Macy is telling us her story. This is credit to Patrick's incredible research and creatively with using 3rd person limited omniscient point of view (delving into the psyche of one character). In addition, you can see him moving effortlessly between these points of view. This is beauty and power of point of view when applied to narrative journalism.

- Traditional Journalism celebrates itself for its 3rd person objective reporting. The narrator (journalist) should not appear at all, and all that matters is the facts of the story. This is useful as far as POV is concerned because it is very easy to identify and to recreate. See the student example by Skyler Anderson below:

What we can learn from online queer communities

As COVID-19 restrictions turn one year old, what can we learn from communities that were organized online before the pandemic?

(Image would usually be featured in this location with caption)

Skyler Anderson

Student at University of Michigan – Dearborn

March 24, 2021

Over the course of the past year, the world has been grappling with the COVID-19 Pandemic. In this time in person interactions have had to be dramatically

reduced to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus. With the stopping of physical interactions it is a good idea to look towards communities that are used to interacting with each other in a primarily virtual way.

LGBTQ+ communities have often found themselves primarily interacting online long before the pandemic had started. This online interaction had come about out of necessity as queer people often find themselves put into situations where they are unable to be themselves in public facing ways for one reason or another. This has led to vast and extensive online communities with meaningful relationships of many kinds being built up within them. Perhaps the world at large can learn from these communities in these troubling times.

First and foremost online queer communities show that it is possible to build meaningful and fulfilling connections with other people without ever physically meeting them. With the advent of instant messaging between people conversations can be had with people all across the globe in real time. These conversations can be through text, voice, and even video. What can be taken away from this is that non physical communication can be used for much more than just classes or jobs. They can be used to keep in touch with people you already know or even be used to meet new people. With these connections people are able to interact and discuss interests, talk about what is happening in their lives, and even create lifelong bonds with people.

In the modern era there is much more to do than just talk online. It is incredibly easy to interact with others

through online multiplayer games by hopping into a call and playing a few rounds of a game with some friends in a community game night. There's much more than action shooter games too. There are all sorts of websites where you can play internet adaptations of various board and party games. In addition, there are also ways of watching movies and shows together online seamlessly, such as through browser extensions like WatchParty or websites like caracal.

Another big way of interacting with others is through online concerts. While they gained massive popularity in the past year due to lockdown restrictions they began much earlier than that. One particular example is Coalchella, which is a yearly online edm festival that uses Minecraft as a virtual world to host the festival. While not inherently LGBTQ many acts who took part in the festival have queer members.

There is often talk of online connections being "less real" than physical relationships. Yet when the pandemic hit and the isolation and loneliness of being stuck without any physical interactions began it became clear that humans need interactions in some other way. The queer communities that have existed for years online show that there is another way of achieving this essential human interaction without ever physically being next to someone.

Skyler maintains a distance from the material, and she presents the information clearly and without any subjectivity (it doesn't matter how the journalist feels about the content matter, as the story is prioritized). Still, it is worth mentioning that angle is still present, because Skyler has chosen what

information to include in the article and what the central story of the article is (captured in the headline and lede).

- Scriptwriting and Graphica also rely heavily on 3rd person objective point of view, but in a very different way, and to a much different effect. Both forms are all about "showing," and so there is no commentary/influence from the narrator/journalist. Unlike news journalism, however, the point of view is directly linked to meaning and theme, whereas news journalism is more interested in revealing information. This difference is useful in understanding just how a single point of view can be used and to what effect. See the student example by Skyler Anderson below, focused on the same content matter as the example above.

Example

A Welcoming Community

by: Skyler Anderson

STAGE DIRECTION

The set consists of 5 rooms with a door on the back wall. Each room will have lights that light up whenever a person's message is sent. Rather than reading lines, each line will be played using text-to-speech unless otherwise stated to signify that it is a text message. Each room should have a distinct style. Nyx's room is a

punk style with deep purple lights and a trans flag on the wall. Dawn's room is a pastel style with cyan lights with an ace flag on the wall. Jo's room is in a country style with red lights and a lesbian flag on the wall. Aera's room should have a celtic style with deep green lights with the rainbow flag on the wall. Sierra's room will change with each scene.

SCENE I – NEW MEMBER

Everyone is in their room except for Sierra. Nyx and Jo will be laying on their beds on their phones, while Aera and Dawn will be at their desks. Sierra's room should be furnished with IKEA furniture, have white lights, and no flags on the wall.

Sierra enters scene by entering room and sitting at desk.

SIERRA   Hello, my name is Sierra!

JO   Welcome Sierra, what brings you here?

SIERRA   Well I've begun to question my gender identity so I wanted to join an LGBTQ server to meet some other people and understand myself more.

JO   I hope you enjoy this place, it's really friendly. What pronouns would you like us to use?

SIERRA   For now any are fine.

JO   Alright well I hope you enjoy it here!

NYX   Sierra if you have any questions feel free to ask me!

SIERRA   Thanks, I don't have any at the moment, but everything is just really confusing for me right now.

AERA I get that, I've spent a lot of time thinking about my own identity too.

DAWN Well if you ever need anything feel free to ask, I'm always happy to help a new queer person in need!

(end scene)

SCENE II – VENTING

A few weeks have passed since the previous scene. Sierra's room now has a nonbinary flag uP and the lights are yellow. The IKEA furniture still remains. Aera and Jo are not in the scene, while Sierra, Nyx, and Dawn are.

SIERRA Folks, I am really going through a lot right now and could really use some help.

NYX Aww what's wrong Sierra?

SIERRA It's just that I came out to my family and they are having a hard time accepting me. I'm not in any danger or anything, but they're really not supportive of me.

NYX I've been there. Listen, it doesn't matter what anyone thinks. Your gender identity is valid and you'll get through this.

SIERRA It's just so hard, and it feels like people struggle with using they/them for me.

SIERRA I wish I lived in a more accepting house, in a more accepting area.

DAWN You'll get there eventually. Just remember that we're here for you, and will help you

through this. We're a community and we stick together through tough times.

SIERRA   Thanks, I really needed to hear that.

(end scene)

SCENE III – GAME NIGHT

This scene takes place a few weeks later than the previous. All the actors should be at their desks. Sierra's room is now more vibrant and has a lot of plants. The light color should still be yellow.

SIERRA   What game are we playing tonight?

NYX Skribbl.io

SIERRA   ooo, What's that?

NYX It's a lot like pictionary, but it's online

SIERRA   Sounds fun!

DAWN   It is! I'm really good at it!

JO   Dawn, you lost the last three games we played :p

DAWN   Shhhh I am trying to be cool

JO   Try ice.

AERA Alright ready to begin?

ALL   Yeah

A few rounds go by, actors should improvise actions and actually play the game for effect. Screen should be added to the stage so the audience can watch the game as it happens.

> **SIERRA** That was really fun! We should do it again sometime!
>
> **AERA** Yeah! We try to organize them on every Friday, but we fell out for a bit. Since everyone enjoys them, I'll try to organize them a lot more.
>
> **SIERRA** Alright! I really like hanging out with y'all
>
> **JO** We really like hanging out with you too, I'm glad you decided to join our community. I'm sure the others think much the same.
>
> *(end scene)*

Again, the point of view here is 3rd person objective, and yet, the effect is completely different. The focus is, of course, on the characters in the story, and while we don't delve into the psyches of these characters, we do understand their thoughts and feelings through there words and actions. This is a credit to Skyler's scene and character development. In this way, point of view complements all of the other elements of fiction in order to heighten the reader experience.

Media Attributions

- Screen Shot 2021-08-31 at 12.08.47 PM

9. Digital Storytelling

"Don't get too comfortable with the present. Journalism is ever-changing, more so than many other fields. Solid writing skills, flexibility and curiosity go a long way in helping one adapt."
– Sally Banner

If we look back through the history of journalism, we've come full circle. Historically, journalism was narrative by nature. This all changed with the advent of the telegraph, as the speed that information travelled increased exponentially, as did the volume of stories the general reader had at their fingertips. This changed the nature of news journalism and unfortunately, the purpose of it. Information was valued over story. Now, we find that the meaning is lost without the story, and so the narrative
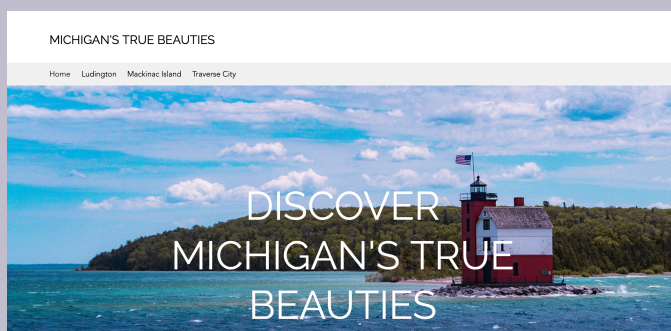
framework and longform journalism has reestablished a more prominent role in major networks and publications.

With the advent of the internet and digital media, we have an abundance of new tools and methods for storytelling, and documentaries, podcasts, etc. are incredible vehicles for narrative journalism. As digital platforms get more sophisticated, so do the ways in which storytelling takes place. Now we have VR, interactive, storymaps, and social media stories that include multiple forms of media and engage us in never-seen-before ways. In doing so, there is a larger diversity of voices and stories from all corners of the world. This is the future of narrative journalism, and it would behoove any aspiring narrative journalist to immerse themselves in this new format of digital storytelling. The [Online Journalism Awards archives](#) is the perfect place to start, but let's look at a few student examples, two of which take the form of websites, and one that is presented through Instagram:

Example 1

The Future of Education

Home · Future of Education in Michigan · Aspiring Educators · Meet the Author

The Future of Education

Teaching throughout the past decade has been considered a dying field. Many people do not want to become teachers, and many current teachers are retiring. Moreover, with the COVID-19 pandemic, mass amounts of teachers are considering quitting. Consequently, the future of education is in the hands of aspiring educators.

Within the last decade, there has been an overall decline in teaching. This shortage harms students, teachers, and the overall public education system. The schools lack qualified teachers who can help students develop their knowledge and skills that they will need in life.

By: Brooke Madgwick

Brooke's piece of digital storytelling focuses on the future of education, and it incorporates a strong balance of primary and secondary research, and it wonderfully integrates multimedia sources in order to tell a more complete and engaging story.

Example 2

MICHIGAN'S TRUE BEAUTIES

Home   Ludington   Mackinac Island   Traverse City

DISCOVER MICHIGAN'S TRUE BEAUTIES

By: Autumn Tashman

Autumn's piece highlights the use of visual media while embracing the blog format to draw the reader in and allow them to connect to the human experience situated in place. This piece nicely draws together elements of digital storytelling and place-based journalism to inspire us to explore more of the state of Michigan.

Example 3
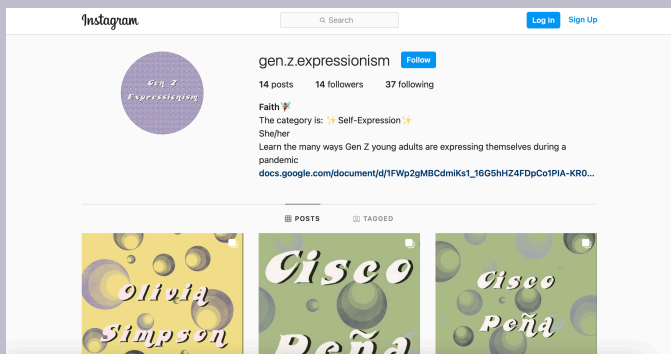
By: Faith Billinger

Faith's piece of digital storytelling in an incredible artistic sequence of character profiles all put together through the social media platform, Instagram. Not only does this appeal to a new generation of readers, but it allows Faith to reflect her personality and style through the angle and scope of the piece, and in doing so, we not only learn about the story subjects and their style, but more general trends of expressionism and fashion popular with Generation Z in 2020.

All of these examples speak to the creativity and opportunity that exist within digital storytelling. As pieces of narrative journalism, all of the same concepts and strategies still apply: the philosophy of ethics, the importance of thorough primary and secondary research, the role of angle and scope, and the possibilities that exist for your own storytelling when applying the elements of fiction to narrative nonfiction work.

Media Attributions

- Screen Shot 2021-08-31 at 12.17.10 PM
- Screen Shot 2021-08-31 at 12.17.27 PM
- Screen Shot 2021-08-31 at 12.19.51 PM

Glossary

Angle

Angle refers to the author's perspective on the story subject (i.e. what, specifically, the author is trying to communicate).

Flash Forward

Flash forward is a technique used in storytelling to leap forward in time from the chronological progression of the story.

Flashback

Flashback is a technique used in storytelling to leap back in time from the chronological progression of the story.

Genres

Genre is a term used to define a category or type of creative expression sharing similar style, form, or subject matter.

Primary Research

Primary research is any research that you, the journalist, collects through first-hand experience (i.e. interviews, surveys, experiments, personal observations, etc.)

Psychic Distance

Psychic distance refers to the proximity the reader is to the characters' psyches. The closer the psychic distance, the more the reader knows about internal thoughts, emotions, etc.

Scope

Scope refers to the 'narrative' scope of an article (i.e. how much narrative coverage (scene/dialogue/etc.) is included in an article).

Secondary Research

Secondary research is any research that someone else has collected first-hand (or second-hand) and that you access through libraries, databases, archives, etc.

Stage Direction

Stage direction refers to the descriptive content that helps the audience (and performers) visualize the stage setting and arrangement of characters.

Suspense

A literary technique used to create tension in a story by withholding crucial information or playing around with mood, setting, etc.