

Why is narrative important to humans?

Dave Sinclair

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This essay examines the premise that narrative is a fundamental and widely used linguistic tool that is used to participate and negotiate in personal and public relationships and to express or compete for social status in a broad range of contexts. It is also a key means to satisfy some basic human psychological needs. It plays an important part in communicating information, providing entertainment, recounting past events, positioning individuals within personal relationships, establishing social hierarchies and distributing intellectual, moral and artistic ideas. It provides a vehicle for political propaganda and for giving people a sense of belonging and identity.

Humans have been using narrative to write and recount stories for a very long time (since before the invention of Egyptian hieroglyphs and the writing of Homer's *Iliad*). Recently though it has been recognised that narrative discourse can also be used for purposes other than literary or historical storytelling. These include situations such as the small-scale narratives of casual conversations in the supermarket, written and digital correspondence, slogans, advertisements, digital media and on a larger scale, use in social media for commercial marketing and political propaganda (Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 46). As Gardner says, 'Stories are the single most powerful weapon in a leader's arsenal' (cited in Daft, 2014, p. 247). The philosopher, Richard Kearney also sees narrative as inseparable from the process of living, saying that 'Every life is in search of a narrative ... [that] provides us with one of our most viable forms of identity - individual and communal' (Kearney, 2002, p. 4).

Wales defines narrative as 'basically a story, of happenings or events, either real or imaginary, which the narrator considers interesting or important' (Wales, 2001, p. 264).

Early literary theorists such as the Russian Formalists considered a narrative to be made up:

the ‘fabula’ – the actual sequence of events, and the ‘sjuzet’ - the artistic organisation of these events (perhaps using flashbacks, foreground and different points of view) (Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 20). This distinction between ‘story’ (the what of a story) and ‘discourse’ (the how, the way it is told) has also been adopted by modern scholars, e.g. Chatman (ibid). Genette takes the view that narrative is not only the story itself but also the act of telling that story and the textual or other media used to convey the story (Genette, cited in Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 48-50). Genette thus suggests there are at least three aspects to narrative. Firstly, there is the narrative statement (notated here as G1). This statement is the text of the narrative, e.g. the words that are said by the narrator and their body language, tone and gestures. Secondly, there are the actual events of the narrative (G2) - the things that happen in the narrative. Thirdly, there is the act of telling the story - this is the performative and possibly interactive aspect of the narrative (G3). Thus, the totality of the narrative is the sum of its written or spoken form, the events it describes, and the act of telling it. Squire takes a more technical linguistic perspective: ‘Adopting a minimal, inclusive definition, we can say that a narrative is a set of signs – that is, a set of signifiers that stand for concepts or signifieds (Squire et al., 2014) – that by their movement, generate meaning’ (Squire, 2017, p. 173). The signifiers make up the physical form of the narrative (words, speech, tone, gestures, stylistic features) and the signifieds are the conceptual contents of the narrative, i.e. its purpose and meaning.

These various definitions each approach narrative somewhat differently – for example, Wales, unlike Squire, does not explicitly separate the physical text or speech of the narrative from its semantic content. Genette includes that act of narration as an element in the narrative, but Squire does not; Squire would argue that, amongst other things, different narratives can employ different variations of narrative signifiers (e.g. different voice tones, speech speeds or vocabulary) – thus providing a stylistic means to differentiate types of narrative (e.g. political from medical). However, no single definition is superior to any other

- each definition can be useful according to circumstance. They can also be used in combination.

As an example, consider the installation instructions for a kitchen sink (Blanco, 2025). This is a simple story, requiring little embellishment of its linear sequence of events and thus matches Wales's narrative definition well. The narrator is a corporation, the story is the sequence of installation operations on an instruction leaflet, and the language is diagrammatic rather than textual. In Squire's terms, each diagram is a signifier showing physically what must be done to achieve that process step, and the associated increment in progress in installation is the signified element. While this type of narrative is concerned primarily with the simple transfer of knowledge, it can also be seen as a more layered and complex discourse. When viewed from Genette's perspective, the narrative events are mapped to the human activity of carrying out the sequence of required installation events (G2). The narrator (the Blanco corporation) chooses to use a single two-page leaflet containing the visual language of assembly diagrams as the tangible form of the story (G1). This allows Blanco to use the same physical form of the story to narrate the story in multiple different telling situations, i.e. in different customer countries (G3). This avoids translation costs and offers Blanco a worthwhile commercial cost saving. However, Blanco's cost driven narrative does reduce the tellability of the instructional narrative – a common aspect in the non-textual instructions provided by many types of 'flat pack' manufacturers (Myers, 2017).

People choose differing language features to make them appear to be authoritative, knowledgeable, participative, obstructive, empathic, or disinterested according to the situation. They also seek to gain agency or status, to reinforce their legitimacy and authority to speak. Much of the linguistic positioning of the speakers depends on the social context, cultural norms and the topic of conversation. Johnstone sees status positioning as 'the see-saw on which power shifts in all relationships. Subtle status shifts occur all the time in

real-life exchanges...’ (Johnstone, cited in Neale, 2009, p. 67).

Participants in narratives often make strategic language choices to place themselves in an advantageous position relative to other speakers during the discourse. This is often a dynamic process, as ongoing choices shape how participants are perceived and related to by others within the interaction. Bamberg (quoted in Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 51-59) defines three levels of narrative positioning: (1) the way in which the characters are positioned relative to each other in the story world, (2) the positioning of the narrator relative to the audience within the act of narration, (3) the way in which the narrator positions themselves to establish their own sense of self, in the story world.

Examples of different levels of positioning can be found in *The Times*’s March 3rd 2025 edition. Here Swinford et al (2025, p. 1) write a narrative account of recent political events, which includes direct quotes of some politicians (e.g. ‘Sir Keith Starmer has said that “Europe must do the heavy lifting”’, (ibid)) and paraphrases others (e.g. ‘Macron also said that European countries should raise their defence spending...’ (ibid)). The journalist’s recounting of events may be seen as the ‘fabula’ of the larger political story. Inside, Moody and Brennan (2025) narrate the same events, adding their own perspective, e.g. saying, ‘The Norwegian defence minister felt obliged to say ...’ (ibid. p. 6) rather than simply quoting him directly. They add emotional colour with adjectives such as ‘peremptory’ in the phrase ‘President Duda was given a peremptory brush off’ and add interpretative content to their narration with statements such as ‘The idea is gaining training traction’. In doing so they are augmenting the ‘sjuzet’ of the story and are in effect re-narrating their own modified version of the original story events. This enrichment is extended when the same narrative is also recast and re-narrated with less emphasis on the details of the factual events and more on the implications of those events in ‘Comment’ Lucas (2025, p. 6) and an unattributed ‘Analysis’ (The Times, 2025, p. 7). The ‘Analysis’ piece is positioning the editorial author at

Bamberg's level 3 and offers an authoritative and insightful account of the political situation by virtue of its analytical and summative style – this is in effect an account that the readership of the paper can regard as a trustworthy representation of the story world. The original article writers, Swinford et al., are operating differently, at Bamberg's level 2, as reporters who simply relay narrative events to a passive newspaper readership. The politicians in the story are also being positioned by the way Swinford et al report the narrative. By quoting Starmer directly as in 'Europe must do the heavy lifting', their narrative shows that Starmer is trying to gain agency and position himself as a leader by using the strong obligation of the modal auxiliary 'must' as a decisive and direction instruction. However, by selecting the modal conditional 'should' in their paraphrase of Macron's statement, Swinford et al are subtly lowering Macron's positional status relative to Starmer.

Turning now to why narrative has a central role in our lives, one of its many roles is the conveyance of useful information in discourse (as in the case of the sink installation instructions above). Such instructions require little embellishment or 'sjuzet'. At the other end of the spectrum, narratives used in the popular entertainment media often emphasise style over substance, responding to audience demand for an escapist distraction from daily life. Examples are TV series such as *Suits* (Korsch, 2010) where the storytelling departs from an accurate and realistic depiction of the practice of law into a display of conspicuous and entertaining materialistic consumption, clashes of egos, and highly dynamic personal and sexual relationships. It is this flexibility and ubiquity of narrative that allows it to be useful in many ways. A selection of these will now be examined.

As another illustration of the purpose of positioning and status control in both public and private discourse, consider *The Ballad of John Axon*, the first of a sequence of multi-modal radio ballads in the form of a 'narrative documentary'. Here the story of a railway tragedy (Keenor, 2022) is told using a combination of the words of those involved (collected via field

recordings) together with folk songs and other theatrical material (Parker, cited in BBC, 2025). This results in a highly creative and novel artistic work. The use of different linguistic styles plays an important role in the piece. For example, the Ministry of Transport accident report opens ‘I have the honour to report the result of my inquiry ...’ (MacColl and Parker, 1958, scene 1), emphasising the positioning of the speaker within the government establishment, while the authenticity of the accents, phraseology and vocabulary of tape-recorded witness statements added dramatic immediacy and social context to the narration:

‘I’m in a reet mood this morning. Eh dear.’

‘The old railwayman, it was a tradition, it was part of your life, ... railways went through the back of your spine like Blackpool went through rock.’ (ibid, scene 3).

The witnesses are making a statement of self-actualisation, in strong contrast to the impersonal style of the Ministry of Transport report. These witness extracts show acts of social positioning at Bamberg’s level 3 that express their pride in their cultural and social grouping as railwaymen and which establish their place in the world. More fine-grained positioning occurs, e.g. at Bamberg’s level 1, where Mrs Axon describes her husband’s willingness to try to learn to dance with his wife, thus accepting a potentially less manly role, for the purpose of pleasing her: ‘Wasn’t really very interested in dancing at first, but I’ve always liked dancing, so he thought he’d try...’ (ibid, scene 7).

Consider now how narrative helps us understand the world. Maslow (1943) proposed that humans act according to motivational theory based on a hierarchy of five levels. Humans will first seek to satisfy their most fundamental physiological needs (air, water, food, shelter, heat, physical and financial safety etc). Only when these are satisfied will they then seek higher levels: the giving and receiving of love (level 3), self and peer esteem (level 4) and self-actualisation at level 5. These are the levels that literary narratives often attempt to fulfil. Philip Pullman states: ‘After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world’ (Pullman, quoted in Gillespie, 2013). This view also extends

outside the literary community: ‘We posit that writing, especially in doctoral research, is not just a tool for communication but a means of self-formation. This perspective redefines reflexivity as a transformative intellectual and existential process’ (Bright, McKay and Firth, 2023, p. 408). Thus, storytelling is fundamentally important in forming the listener’s view of what it is to be human and where an individual finds their place in the world.

As an example, consider the canonical Old English poem *Beowulf* (Wyatt, 1984). Composed sometime in the Middle Ages, its only written translation to Anglo-Saxon is dated to approximately 975-1025 CE (Stanley, 1997, pp. 197-212). *Beowulf* positions Anglo-Saxon society by using a narrative that emphasises core values of honour, strength and loyalty. The heroic deeds of *Beowulf* are highly significant to its Anglo-Saxon audience, in that they represent an expression of their culture and a meaningful life objective. The tradition of oral narration in their communal Mead Hall setting was an important factor in uniting its warrior audience, and the narrative act of recounting the pagan origins of their society established both personal and national identity in Anglo-Saxon England. With its concept of ‘wyrd’ and the possibility of a post-death Valhalla, *Beowulf* examined the fundamental concern of what makes a good and honourable death and reassured its audience that heroic actions in life have worth and meaning, re-reinforcing their understanding of their place in their pagan world. Similar questions are raised in *The Ballad of John Axon* - where Axon’s devotion to duty and the moral values of his society informed his choices and the actions that led to his death. There are strong parallels between the pagan heroism of Beowulf’s funeral ship burial and expectations of Valhalla and John Axon’s George Medal and the 1960s view of Christian redemption. Both *Beowulf* and *The Ballad of John Axon* are thus narratives that establish and shape our understanding of our place in the world.

This discussion has shown that narrative is an extraordinarily flexible and ubiquitous tool. The examples here have demonstrated that narrative has a key role in the lives of individuals

and social groups, facilitating the exchange of information, the dynamic adjustment of social relationships, and the recounting of history to support the existential needs of a cultural or social group. Narrative allows people to exchange life experiences, to discuss the moral and religious perspectives within and between generations and it aids and encourages people to make sense of how they came to be in whatever place they occupy in the world.

(2500 words)

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