

A Rhetorical Tool and a Link to Composition: The Appeals of Narrative in Professional Writing Pedagogy

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Introduction

Narrative is a valuable genre to use in composition classes to help students understand their own identity, develop writing skills, including understanding how to structure and use personal experience with a rhetorical purpose in an essay or argument. Once they get to upper division writing courses, however, students are exposed to writing that places less emphasis on that personalized, subjective genre and moves toward the impersonal. Such writing limits the use of narrative, which is generally perceived as highly personal and subjective because it generally conveys only the narrator's perspective. Narrative includes precise details of an event that occurred in the past which are reported in the same order in which they occurred, as well as an observation or evaluation of the information by the narrator (Rentz, 1992). Narrative, generally, is distinguished from argument in its concern with the particular instead of with generalizations. However, elements of narrative occur in business writing, and it is important to link genres used in developmental and composition pedagogy to professional kinds of writing as well; such a link reinforces what students have learned and encourages them to refine skills related to it.

The notion of using narrative in business writing pedagogy is not new (Rentz), and scholarship has discussed the rhetorical value of narrative in professional writing (Blyler, 1995 and 1996; and Jameson, 2004). Jameson observes that narrative contributes to "a hybrid, internally dialogic language that fulfills a social purpose by reflecting human relationships even when the subject matter is impersonal and technical." Narrative can be used to effect persuasive rhetoric while also acculturating students to professional writing. In spite of this scholarship, narrative is still largely devalued within business and professional writing pedagogy (Beemer, Bowels and Shaver, 2005). This paper considers narrative's use in writing composition pedagogy and how it has been perceived in business writing pedagogy; it then reports on how narrative functions as rhetorical appeals in professional settings and it also discusses how, consequently, narrative can be used pedagogically to transition students from the composition-level writing to discipline-specific writing.

Narrative in Composition Pedagogy

Narrative has had a conflicted past in the field of composition studies. Summarizing the debate surrounding the use of narrative in writing pedagogy, Duffy (1998) explains,

Because the personal narrative urges students to focus on their own experiences, critics argue that it is useless to students. To supporters, personal narratives serve not just as a record of events, but they offer students the opportunity to explore what they know, make decisions concerning their writing and perhaps learn something about themselves along the way. Other supporters argue that the personal narrative is extremely relevant to students. They agree that skill in writing narratives progresses toward skill in exposition, so that the skills build upon each other to produce better writers. Narrative is taught at several levels of writing instruction. (p.1)

As narrative returned as an acceptable genre for composition pedagogy, its value has increased. Instructors are able to use it various ways at different levels. Kies (2007) observes that it is used at community colleges and four-year institutions primarily in developmental and basic writing courses and first year composition courses. In these settings it is used to help students express their own experiences and to encourage reflection on those experiences. It is also used in four-year institutions in advanced exposition courses in the form of memoirs and folk tales (p. 1).

Because of its versatility in being used at multiple levels of writing instruction, narrative is useful to engage students so that they share experiences while developing their writing skills. Kies explains that, “narrative offers writers a chance to think and write about themselves, to explain how their experiences lead to some important realization or conclusion about their lives or about the world in general” (Kies, p. 1).

People learn about themselves through experiences, and narrative offers an opportunity to reflect on an event and how that event affected the narrator, as he or she shares the story with others. Students are free to express themselves through story-telling. Composing a narrative requires little advanced training in rhetoric. These attributes make it appealing for composition level pedagogy.

Narrative can be expressed in a single paragraph or as an entire essay. Oftentimes, in the basic writing or composition course, students are asked to develop a personal narrative, comprising an entire essay. However narratives can be integrated as a single paragraph within a larger essay or message. Kies states that,

a narrative paragraph can be an effective, interesting way to integrate significant background information into a variety of different essay types. Even if the essay as a whole primarily uses another method of development, the narrative paragraph can be incorporated into an essay to support a topic sentence in a particular paragraph and to establish a bit of ethical appeal at the same time. (p. 1)

Composition theory indicates that people like to share stories about themselves. This is among the reasons narrative is valued as a genre for teaching composition. Blyler (1995)

alludes to the “intersubjective” nature of rhetoric—the communication of equals who attempt to understand each other” (p. 291). As a subjective genre, narrative facilitates communication between persons who then apply meaning to shared stories. We value our own experiences, and we appreciate when others share their experiences with us so that we might learn from those experiences or compare them with our own to arrive at some negotiated meaning of an event and its implications.

Treatment of Narrative in Professional Writing Pedagogy

Narrative has long been considered negatively in business writing pedagogy. Its subjective, informal style is often perceived as unprofessional. Even writing centers that cater to business writing students push students away from its use in their writing. Beemer, Bowles and Shaver (2005) explain that the transition from composition to business writing is difficult for many students because business writing pedagogy tends to move away from those less formal genres students practice in composition classes. The move from academic writing to professional writing is a difficult transition if the two are not linked. Pedagogy that devalues a genre that students have been encouraged to use previously creates a challenge for students as they try to link what they have learned to new forms of writing. Writing about a writing center that developed in collaboration between the Department of English and the College of Business at Miami University (Ohio), they explain that students struggle to adjust to an apparently different set of forms of writing than that which they have experienced:

They are often surprised by the advice we serve up: Get rid of the introduction and begin with your “Big Idea”...Use headers instead of in-text transitions...Get to the point as soon as possible...Use bullet points...Keep the length to two pages or shorter...Lose the flowery language. Students sometimes have a hard time swallowing such advice; after all, it contradicts much of what they learn in their college composition courses. Indeed, the advice we offer students in the Writing Center often contradicts the advice we give students in our own composition classes. In any case, because students are adept at writing academic-ese (thorough introductions that begin with a “hook,” narrative arguments that build up to the big finale, smooth transitions, sum-it-all-up conclusions), the biggest challenge many of them face is making the transition from academic writing to business writing.

(Paragraph 2)

While formatting a document is important to the professionalization of writing, students also need a means to help them understand a link to prior writing they have learned. Business writing textbooks include sections about descriptions, instructions and persuasion; pedagogy about which is also offered at the composition level. However, studies of how managerial audiences read documents find that few read an entire document and most prefer a highly structured document that places important information in easily accessible locations. With these studies in mind, business writing pedagogy has moved away from expository forms of writing and toward more concise and formal presentation. Rentz (1992) observes that this pedagogy has led to the “devaluation of narrative, in which information is not divided into clearly marked

categories, the chronology of events as they occurred is pretty much left intact, and the key point, if stated, may well come at the end” (p. 293). Students must change their style to accommodate more concise expression of information and professionalization of their writing through format, which makes information more accessible to the reader.

Very few business writing textbooks explicitly discuss the use of narrative as a rhetorical tool. However, many textbooks integrate examples of business forms of writing that include elements of narrative, though they do not discuss that use of narrative. A review of four recent texts used for business writing and technical writing pedagogy (four texts published between 2006 and 2007 and authored by Kolin, Oliu et al, Markel and Gurak and Lannon) finds that the word narrative is neither indexed or used, even though in the business writing textbooks (Kolin and Oliu et al) forms of narrative are used in characterizations and examples of incident reports (Kolin, p240), trip reports (Kolin, p.236; Oliu et al, pp. 360-361), persuasive writing (Oliu et al, p. 440) and implied in characterizations of instructions (Kolin, p.207; Oliu et al, p. 409). Kolin list questions that a trip report answers; among them are: “Whom did you see? What did they tell you? What did you do about it?” (p. 236). These suggest attributes of narrative in telling about details of an event. Oliu et al also imply narrative in their example of a trip report: “I further inspected the engine to determine whether other parts may have been harmed and discovered that the following moving parts were damaged...” (p. 360). Oliu et al even lists trip reports among “Informal Reports”, suggesting that it can accommodate less objective, informal style. Oliu et al, in their chapter about proposals (Chapter 13) include an example that integrates a brief generalized narrative, characterizing a process and its typical consequences: To dump this metal, the tow motor operator raises the rack over the edge of the scrap-metal bin...this method has resulted in two tow-motor tip-overs” (p. 440). Finally, when discussing instructions, Oliu et al encourages writers to “Learn to perform the operation yourself”(409). This implies using that experience as a guide to develop step-by-step instructions; suggesting that narration be used as a tool for writing steps of a process. Kolin, integrates a description of writing steps that includes similar elements found in narratives: “Put the steps in their correct order...”; and put only the right amount of information in each step” (p. 207). Kolin offers no guidelines to determine what may be “right”, suggesting that this is subjectively determined by the writer within the parameters of their audience analysis.

Kolin’s example of an incident report (p.240) offers the clearest example of narrative, though he makes no mention of the word narrative or narrate. In the section of the report titled “Description of Incident,” which is two paragraphs long, he includes the following statements:

At 7:20am on March 3, 2006, I was driving Engine 457 traveling north at a speed of fifty-two miles an hour on a single main-line track...Weather conditions and visibility were excellent. Suddenly the last two grain cars...jumped the track. I notified Supervisor...at 7:40a.m., and within forty-five minutes he and a section crew arrived at the scene. The section crew removed the two grain cars, put in new ties, and made the main-line track passable by 9:25a.m. At 9:45a.m.a vacuum car arrived...and its crew proceeded with the cleanup operation. (p.240)

This illustration includes several attributes identified above by Rentz as elements of narrative. It provides details of an event that occurred in the past as they occurred; and, while in the tips for such messages Kolin emphasizes objective style and fact over opinion, the sentence “Weather conditions and visibility were excellent” suggests subjective evaluation. While the details are presented with a formal tone, the statements combine to form a narrative of the incident.

The authors of the technical writing textbooks integrate examples in such sections that emphasize more formal, objective language. Narrative is not used in examples of other forms of reporting in either set of textbooks. This suggests either a conflicted attitude of authors of such textbooks to refer to the narrative genre explicitly, though they recognize the genre as useful. This suppression of the word narrative in these textbooks, when combined with their explicit use of other genres also found in composition pedagogy; e.g.: description, instruction, persuasion, suggests agreement that narrative as such not be used in professional and scientific writing. Another possibility for this is potential confusion about what constitutes narrative.

It is difficult to distinguish narrative from many other forms of discourse because various elements of narrative occur in other genres as well. Rentz states, “we understand much, if not all, of our experience in narrative form, so that even those things we write that do not take the shape of narrative have been distilled from our original narrative-like understanding of what we are writing about”(p. 299).

Rentz acknowledges that narrative includes: details of an event that occurred in the past and reported in the same order in which they occurred; an observation or evaluation of the information by the narrator; precise detail to facilitate visualization of the event; and she asserts findings that indicate narrative provides some insight into the narrator’s character (p. 296). Rentz further distinguishes narrative from argument as opposites by characterizing narrative as concerned with the particular instead of with generalizations, holistic rather than a composite of different parts, and providing a quality of reflection (p. 297). What is missing from this characterization is whether the style must be formal or informal or what constitutes objective language. The Kolin example certainly uses more formal style as events associated with the incident are listed, and the “excellent” weather conditions may be based on what members of the author’s and audience’s discourse community considers to be professional, objective standards associated with such an assessment, rather than on personal subjectivity. However, all of narrative’s attributes are involved in the passage.

According to Rentz, narrative is among the only genres that limit generalization because of their emphasis on describing a particular event (p. 297). She further indicates that the telling of a story helps an audience visualize an event. This visualization can extend to conceptualization of issues as well. Rentz observes that in her studies managers actually prefer to include narratives because it helps them include much valuable information (p. 294).

Linking Narrative and Business Writing Pedagogy

The attributes identified above link narrative to a number of genres of business and technical writing, including: writing instructions that include safety tips, as well as to analytic writing and claim letters. Also, a number of the attributes of narrative are useful in proposal writing; these attributes give narrative qualities that meet the appeals of logos, pathos and ethos, qualities that will be discussed later. Rentz asserts further that narratives are a form of discourse tool, and Blyler acknowledges that narratives are valuable because they are related to the communities in which we live; as such it has ethnographic qualities about it and social organization is maintained through stories (p. 295).

As mentioned above, Oliu et al encourage readers of their text to become familiar with the process about which they are to write instructions. As one performs a task, he or she goes through certain steps, which are then written down and drafted for a particular audience. This gives writing instructions an attribute of narrative; one essentially narrates an event (task performance) in the sequence in which they performed it, considering information needs of the audience and appropriate details for the audience. The writer, further, reflects on potential hazards involved in the process and integrates safety tips to help readers avoid such hazards.

As presented above in the excerpted example from Kolin, narrative may take on a more formal tone in business writing settings than it does in composition-level or less formal writing settings. However, it maintains the attributes that characterize it.

Narratives help us understand ourselves and our community. Blyler (1996) encourages teachers to show students narratives of professional discourse to acculturate them into the professional community. As students are exposed to narratives of professionals who are communicating with each other, they can come to learn the kinds of activities/experiences associated with a particular kind of career as well as learn the discourse of a given community. Blyler (1995) states that, "Narrative can give understanding of how people conceptualize their existences in concert with others..."

Shared narratives are means by which events in a group's communal life are given significance...(they) are not neutral but rather always interpret, slant, suggest and persuade...in doing so they accommodate the community to the images that accompany its unfolding history by bringing new events into line with the overall values and emotions expressed in the communities rhetorical vision...Narratives build group consciousness and create social realities. (p.300)

She also connects narrative to postmodernism: that is, narrative brings a local flavor to a discussion. Because it conveys shared experiences it considers dynamics more local to community (p. 333). As such it helps readers understand a given community's perspective and what it considers to be reality. One's world is represented within a local construct—that construct reflects the immediacy of interaction with one's world/reality. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) describe the notion of reality as a socially

constructed phenomenon. Reality is socially constructed through the sequence of statements by members of a community, and this collection of statements is interpreted a certain way and valued by a social group. Reality is reflected in messages conveyed by various people who represent members of a given group. The more people within the group who assimilate with a given event as expressed through multiple narratives, the more that representation is perceived as a truth or reality. If several people in a hearer's discourse community convey similar statements/assertions, the assertion is further advanced as a reality. Perelman and Obrechts-Tyteca explicitly acknowledge that their concern is "not an objective description of reality, but the manner in which opinions concerning [reality] are presented"(p. 262). Once a community considers something to be a reality, it is valued as a fact or truth. Perelman and Obrechts-Tyteca further assert that decisions regarding actions that depend on judgments of reality and value judgments depend on the speaker's personality and are left to his or her discretion (p. 514). Consequently, a set of narratives from a single community provides an ethnographic study of that community and its discourse.

Jameson (2004) asserts that "a business document is an artifact—a representation of reality, not reality itself" (p. 230). This echoes Blyler's point about how a collection of narratives represents a community's reality, helping readers understand the perspective of one within that community and to learn realities of that community. Jameson goes on to state that, "business prose that achieves you-attitude artfully juxtaposes the writer's voice (perspective) and the reader's vision (perspective) and thus demonstrates a relationship in which the writer expresses an understanding of the reader's vision"(p. 247). This further recalls Blyler's point about the "intersubjective nature of rhetoric--communication of equals who attempt to understand each other." As such, narrative appeals to an audience that shares similar experiences, giving it persuasive qualities.

Rentz specifically identifies four advantages to using narrative in business writing. These are: 1) narrative seems to be a faster read than expository prose and is more easily understood and remembered, 2) narratives are more persuasive than non-narrative prose, 3) narratives provide a more complete description of an occurrence than other modes of discourse do, and 4) narrative allows a reader to go beyond information processing. Readers find narrative more appealing than expository prose that reports only facts and draws conclusions and recommendations from those facts. While expository prose is more formal than narrative, it also is impersonal.

In business writing pedagogy, students learn to apply various arguments to develop a proposal. The proposal genre especially permits writers to express their position regarding a problem and ways to address it. This allows the proposal to include a narrative with a social purpose whether in a professional setting or civic environment. The reader can easily relate to an experience presented in narrative. This is what makes narrative popular in composition level courses, and it can be used to transition students into upper division, professional writing coursework. In fact, narrative is versatile as a rhetorical element accomplishing all three forms of appeals in argument. Professional writing and technical writing pedagogy tends to value development of argumentative and persuasive writing skills, which include understanding how to apply various appeals.

Proposals that affect the public should integrate narrative to help the public relate to business concerns and needs, as well as to understand the implications of that being proposed, and narrative should be encouraged in business writing courses as a means to link the kind of writing students learn in their composition courses with upper-division writing that is to prepare students for workplace writing.

The following sections describe applications of narrative in various forms of appeals that may be used in persuasive writing in particular, such as that found in proposals; it is important to note that none of them is derived from an explicit business or professional writing application or textbook. This is largely because lengthy examples of narrative are rare in such textbooks, yet examples in such texts include elements of narrative in shorter passages. Even though the examples below are taken from outside explicit business writing settings, each can be applied to a business-related setting.

Narrative as Ethos

A number of studies indicate that narrative contributes to establishing a speaker's/writer's character (Rentz, Kies, Jackson and Blyler). An ethical argument is one that emphasizes the trustworthiness of the writer/speaker. If an oncologist reports that empirical studies link smoking to cancer, the relationship between smoking cigarettes and cancer is valued. Because of the speaker's background, he or she is considered trustworthy. If, however, a tobacco farmer asserts that there is little connection between smoking and cancer, that person's assertion may be considered less trustworthy because of their economic interest in establishing that no relationship between smoking cigarettes and cancer exists. As an ethical tool narrative helps a writer or speaker to assimilate with an audience, giving the audience the impression that the speaker/writer understands their background and sympathizes or empathizes with them, enabling speaker to gain audience's trust.

Dorothy L Sayers spoke in 1938 about women's rights, and this speech was reprinted in 1971. Near the end of it she uses narrative to appeal to her audience. She relates,

A man once asked me...how I managed in my books to write such a natural conversation between men when they were by themselves. Was I, by any chance, a member of a large, mixed family with a lot of male friends? I replied that, on the contrary, I was an only child and had practically never seen or spoken to any men of my own age until I was about twenty-five. "Well, said the man, "I shouldn't have expected a woman to have been able to make it so convincing." I replied that I had coped with this difficult problem by making my men talk, as far as possible, like ordinary human beings. This aspect of the matter seemed to surprise the other speaker; he said no more, but took it away to chew over. One of these days it may quite likely occur to him that women, as well as men, when left to themselves, talk very much like human beings also. Indeed, it has been my experience that both men and women are fundamentally human. (p. 49)

The appeal comes within a speech intended to persuade the audience to pursue women's equal rights. With this description, she relates to her audience by asserting that she uses the same understanding of women to help her formulate a dialog between two men. A male was unable to detect her lack of experience with discourse between males in what he thought were successful descriptions of such discourse; this contributes to her credibility as a speaker of women's equality. Because women are the same as men, she is able to use her experiences with women to create an effective discussion between only males. The narrative, consequently also reinforces that women should have equal rights as men do.

Narrative as Pathos

Because narrative also conveys a narrator's attitude or feeling about what occurred, narrative also can have an emotional appeal. A pathetic argument appeals to an audience's sense of what is right and what is wrong. One may argue that an action should occur because it is right to do so in that situation. One can use narrative as a pathetic argument to make the audience feel kinship with writer in terms of being able to relate to frustrating experience in establishing why action to address something is needed.

In a book that is primarily used in composition-level pedagogy, Faigley and Selzer (2006) use the example of Demarcus Taylor, a student from the University of Texas at Austin who wrote about insufficient health coverage for students in an effort to encourage the University administration to change their policy or create better language to articulate the policy to illustrate persuasive use of narrative. In the example, Taylor wrote:

Let me tell you a story. During my second semester at the University of Texas, I began having headaches. Taking Tylenol helped, but the headaches returned. So, I made an appointment with one of the doctors at University Health Services...The doctor...recommended that I get an MRI to rule out any serious physical problems... I would have to go off campus to a radiology facility to have the procedure done. I had the MRI and the results brought a sigh of relief--no brain tumor. To my surprise, however, I received a bill for \$1642 that my student medical plan did not cover. I called the accounting office and was told that I had to have purchased additional coverage to pay for the MRI. I had improperly assumed that my medical fees would cover any procedures directly ordered by the health center. In fact, these fees only cover minor treatment and office visits, though the specifics are quite vague and answers are hard to find. (p.152-153)

The student presents this narrative to illustrate the consequences of the ineffective, unclear language of the existing policy document. It acknowledges that he had read the document but misunderstood what was covered and what was not covered. This misunderstanding resulted in his having to pay a large sum of money for an MRI, which could have caused him, or any other student in a similar situation, not to be able to attend classes subsequently. This, of course, has economic implications for not only students but also the institution; if students are not able to attend classes after experiencing something similar to this, the institution will be losing students and money as well.

The student uses this example to illustrate what may be considered representative of others in a similar position. The pathetic approach appeals to others who can relate to his experience.

Narrative as Logos

A very basic quality of narrative is that it reports facts and interprets them. Logos refers to the argument presented generally; that is, what facts or other information are being used to appeal to an audience's reasoning. A narrative, when offered with other narratives that assimilate each other, provides a reason why action should be taken; a narrative states a specific example/incident that, when combined with other specific examples/incidents, can be used to persuade an audience that something is disagreeable to a given community, necessitating action. Recalling Blyler's observations about shared experiences as representations of fact and reality, a series of narratives acts to represent the reality perceived by a given community.

An example of this occurred recently at a large Midwestern institution when students protested the University's implementation of a dual grading system, which afforded instructors the opportunity to use plus/minus grades instead of straight letter grades if they so chose. The straight letter grading system had been in place for several years, and in order to pass a resolution permitting the use of plus/minus letter grades, the resolution had to be presented to the faculty senate as an option of using either. Faculty would be able to choose to use either grading system for their classes.

After the first semester in which the dual system had been implemented, the campus newspaper reported experiences of several students who felt the option was unfair. Among the reported experiences were students explaining individual experiences in different classes and comparing with friends: "I fought really hard for an A in one of my classes, but only got an A minus, which lowered my GPA and really pissed me off. If they're giving out B pluses, they ought to give A pluses, too. I had a 98% or 99% in Spanish but still got a regular 4.0 for it." This comment was followed by, "My instructor used plus/minus grading and my friend's instructor used straight letter grades. I got an A- from this instructor in x course, and my friend got an A from another instructor in same course. In effect, I did worse than my friend did in the class" (Rader 2006).

Each of the above statements represents a student's own story about their experience and why they feel the option is unfair. When combined with other similar narratives, the narratives reflect what the community of students feels to be a reality; that a dual grading system is unfair and should be changed to a single grading system. This illustrates Blyler's and Jameson's point about narrative writing as representative of a community's reality.

Again, while these examples are derived from non-business-specific texts, they have applications to business settings: arguments about women's rights continue to occur

before policy-makers; and arguments regarding language of policy and improvements to policy occur on a regular basis in workplace settings.

Conclusion

Narrative is generally used in developmental writing classes to help student practice basic writing skills by engaging them in writing about something they know and understand most—themselves. At the freshman composition level, narrative is used as a means to help students reflect on how events have affected them and to give teachers some insight into their students as a sort of audience analysis tool to guide their pedagogy for a given group of students. However, pedagogy beyond the composition level tends to devalue explicit use of narrative in favor of a more formal and impersonal style. Rentz asserts that narrative acts as a rhetorical tool for use in business writing settings, and Blyler and Jameson acknowledge the value of narrative as a tool to help students understand discourse in professional settings and as a tool for ethnographic study. This essay has posited that narrative also be used to transition students from composition-level writing to discipline-specific forms of writing. Students are exposed to narrative in composition courses and should be encouraged to refine their narrative skills for rhetorical purposes in their writing.

Authors of business writing and technical writing textbooks can accomplish this inclusion of narrative by:

- 1) integrating explicit references to narrative in examples of persuasive writing as well as a tool in developing instructions, and
- 2) integrating references to attributes of narratives in sections explaining style components and distinguishing narratives from more formal, objective forms of reporting information, and
- 3) showing examples of narrative-style persuasive writing and contrasting it with an example of non-narrative-style writing.

Instructors of business writing and technical writing can foster narrative as a transitional tool for students by:

- 1) including exercises that have students narrate their process in doing a given task, and
- 2) encouraging in an exercise or assignment interviews with other students or faculty that integrate narratives of events as a logical appeal in a proposal, and
- 3) asking students to bring a narrative they composed in a previous writing course and develop it into a proposal, trip report or set of instructions, giving it an alternative rhetorical purpose.

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Biography

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