

Telling a Story in Academic Writing



Storytelling is the most engaging way to communicate. In storytelling, writers use a variety of methods to maintain an appealing pace, to create human connections with their readers, and to help readers visualize their ideas. These same techniques are effective across all types of writing. They can be used to make writing assignments more engaging, more readable, and more persuasive.



Storytelling strategies

Build plot

When you build plot, you think of your writing as a sequence of connected events where anticipation (tension) rises toward a final climactic event. And then, a resolution.

The outline of a story can look like this:

- 1 **Exposition**
"This is the background you need to know to understand what's coming next."
- 2 **Rising action**
"First this happened. Then this happened. Then this happened."
- 3 **Climax**
"All of that led to this big event."
- 4 **Resolution**
"Here's how everything came together at the end."

For an academic argument, you can use the traditional narrative arc as a basic structure. The following shows how these elements of story structure might map onto academic papers.



Creating a story for academic writing

Exposition:

Introduce the issue and the argument you want to develop.

Rising Action:

To build tension, arrange your arguments to build in strength. How each point builds upon the previous one should be clear. For example, in a literature review, you would arrange the previous research to show how and why you came to your own research question. (You might think of this format like a detective story. The problems, successes, or omissions in previous research serve as the "clues" that led you to your own research project).

Climax:

At the climax, reveal your most convincing reasoning and evidence.

Resolution:

In the resolution, the final phase, summarize your arguments, emphasizing the significance of the issue.



Balance action with commentary

Academic writing with too much action -- where the writer presents facts and descriptions, one after the other -- reads like a rapid-fire list of statements. This kind of writing doesn't give the reader time to process and reflect on the information. Make sure that you include analysis, reflection, and other commentary to build the right pace for your readers.

In contrast, academic writing with too much commentary feels slow and plodding and often has so much discussion that the reader loses sight of the writer's goal. Make sure that you provide only the most important commentary. Then move on.

Instead of . . .

"So and so argues this... so and so claims this... so and so analyzes this..." or "One definition of the topic is x. Another is y. The definition proposed by z is..." or "There are multiple approaches to the topic. X looks at this . . ., Y views this. . ., Z combines this. . ."

Try . . .

"There are many approaches to the topic. X looks at this . . ., which establishes important criteria for the field but avoids finding a consensus about issue M. Y's research adds to the conversation about fundamental criteria for assessing these clinical situations. However, the author also takes a critical look at the disagreements underlying certain existing criteria. In contrast, rather than establishing criteria, Z investigates systemic assumptions in the field that lead practitioners to weigh some criteria more heavily than others."



Focus on pacing

Use active voice

When writers use active voice they focus their sentences on an actor and the action -- the two most important parts of storytelling. For more information on using active voice, check out our resource, [Active and passive voice](#).

Instead of . . .

Ideally, to avoid unintentional bias in our measurements, information regarding the source population of each specimen was withheld from the observer.

Try . . .

We strived to avoid unintentional bias in our measurements. To that end, **we withheld** from observers, information about each specimen's source population.

Vary sentence and paragraph length

Instead of . . .

Blair shone in his extracurricular activities at school. During his time at university he produced a magazine, joined in the production of other publications, and, in addition, participated in the college's acapella group, but his academic performance reports suggested that he neglected his academic studies. His parents could not afford to send him to university without him winning another scholarship, and thus they concluded from his poor results that he would not be able to win one. His family decided that Blair should join the Imperial Police instead of finishing school.

Try . . .

Blair shone in his extracurricular activities at school. During his time at university he produced a magazine and also joined in the production of other publications. In addition, he participated in the college's acapella group. Despite these achievements, his parents could not afford to send him to university without him winning another scholarship. Judging from Blair's poor results, his family concluded that he would not be able to win. They thought Blair should join the Imperial Police instead.

Omit Clutter

Too many unnecessary words in a sentence can not only lead to confusion, but also slow the pace and make text feel onerous and tiresome.

Instead of . . .

It has been found that CO₂ and H₂O formation **has been reduced** at high temperatures.

Try . . .

Less CO₂ and H₂O **form** at higher temperatures.



Humanize your writing

Stories are powerful because, in one way or another, they place human concerns as their focus. To remind your readers of the human concerns that your research paper addresses, put human elements into your writing.

Use characters as your subjects

When a sentence describes an action completed by a person, that person should be the subject of the sentence. This small change in structure provides your sentences with characters and their actions, adding human elements to the paper.

Instead of . . .

Fetal DNA has been found in maternal plasma but exists as a minor fraction among a high background of maternal DNA. Even with highly precise single counting methods such as digital PCR, a large number of DNA molecules and hence maternal plasma volume would need to be analyzed to achieve the necessary analytical precision.

Try . . .

Researchers have found fetal DNA in maternal plasma, but it exists as a minor fraction among a high background of maternal DNA. Hence, even with highly precise, single molecule counting methods, such as digital PCR, **geneticists** must analyze a large number of DNA molecules and maternal plasma to achieve the necessary analytical precision.

Use the first person (I/we)

First person provides a human connection and improves clarity. It lets the reader know clearly who did what.

Instead of . . .

Here, instead of using approaches that target specific gene loci, the use of a locus-independent method would greatly increase the number of target molecules from the aneuploidy chromosome that could be analyzed within the same fixed volume of plasma.

Try . . .

Here, we chose not to use approaches that target specific gene loci. Rather, by using a locus-independent method, we could greatly increase the number of target molecules from the aneuploidy chromosome, and, with this increase, improve our analysis within the same fixed volume of plasma.

Add metaphor

When we use one object, experience, or event to help symbolize and represent a different one, we are using metaphor. Through metaphor, writers use a concept familiar to the reader to help explain something that is unfamiliar. Metaphor helps a reader understand a concept from two pathways – literal and visual – and increases engagement.

Example:



Beyond treating individual letters as physical objects, the human brain may also perceive a text in its entirety as a kind of physical landscape, similar to the mental maps we create of terrain. For example, in the physical world we might recall that we passed the red farmhouse near the start of a trail we hiked. In a similar way, in text, we remember that we read about Mr. Darcy rebuffing Elizabeth Bennett on the bottom of the left-hand page in one of the earlier chapters.