

Non-Fiction Narrative/Structure  
How Good Books are Built  
Presenters Protocols

## The Basic Steps for Each Two-Week Presentation

1. **Bio:** Keep it short but make it interesting. 10-15 minutes. And make it pointed. Discuss the author, don't sit there and read a report. If certain facts in the author's life bear on the work, then concentrate on those. If the author had a career track that you think might be use to the writers in the seminar, then summarize that. Get anything the writer said about a) the work we are reading, including the writer's reactions to the critics, and b) anything the writer said about the art and act of writing. If the writer has published a journal or a diary or a collection of letters, we especially want to hear some of those. If these primary documents are especially useful, make copies and distribute them.
2. **Reviews:** Get all of them. Start with the Contemporary Authors Series (Bobst REF1 PN771.C585 1-2 1975-1978). There are many other sources; consult with the reference librarian. Cull out the most incisive and most useful to us – reviews that talk about structure and language – and copy those (at least 5). In those reviews, underline or highlight the most useful comments the critic makes, observations that teach us something about writing books. The rest you can review, quote and summarize. Give us a talk on the "critical reception of the book." Look up some general principles of literary criticism. All good reviews start with these three basics: What was the author trying to do and say; did the book succeed or fail and why and how; how does the book compare to others of its kind.
3. **Structure:** You will have to summarize in a couple of words each section and chapter, then create some schemata to show how the book is organized. A) You must account for the author's use of time and space. You do this by charting scenes (settings, venues), actions or events, the introduction and development of characters, the introduction and development of ideas, historical interludes, monographs on this or that. A good way to do this is in PowerPoint, but it might be just as effective to do it in a WP and hand out your tables and lists and summaries so we can refer back to these notes later. You may end up with many schemata, one for each organizing device you discover. Look for the main story and sub-stories or secondary stories – sometimes the main story is called

the story in the present. Keep track of all the story lines and show us how they either connect, interweave, cross or run parallel.

4. **Language or writing style:** Follow Norman's "A Guide to Explicating Text." Look for patterns of usage, diction, syntax. Writers are always repeating themselves in their technique. What literary devices and techniques mark the writer's style. Mark the pages, take us through them. Tell us what works and what does not work, what you like and why (technically), what you don't like and why (technically).
5. The presenters will then **critique the book** -- suggest its weaknesses, its strengths, where and how it might be improved. Here's your chance to put forward your opinions based on all the work you have done.
7. At every step from the first to the last you must, **must include your classmates in the discussion**. You can do this by framing some questions ahead of time or by taking the class list and simply calling on someone with an impromptu question.
8. You have **two weeks to present each book**, roughly 7 hours total. So get yourselves organized, parse out the work evenly and keep the seminar fully engaged every minute.

### The Basic Steps Expanded:

**Structure.** I have assigned only five (six) narratives, several of them very short, because I want you to read every book twice. First time as quickly as possible just to get the information and the raw outlines of the story. What the book is about. So read it as a reader. The second time, I want you to read the book the way a writer reads it.

What to look for:

1. Consider each chapter as its own distinct rhetorical unit, a book in itself. Where, when and with whom does it begin (place, time, character)? Then, paragraph by paragraph, how does it proceed. What kind of work is the writer doing in each paragraph? Delivering character? Delivering information? Advancing story? Attempting to create plot?

2. Track the information in the story. In what sequence is the information presented? What comes first, next, after that and so on. Where is the author going? And how is that information used? Does the author simply dump it on the page -- Gee, reader look at this interesting fact -- or does the author use that information to advance the narrative?
3. In the attack, the job of the writer is to hook the reader. In the rest of the book, the job of the writer is to hold the reader. How does the writer do that? Do that structurally with techniques such as foreshadowing, highlighting conflict that the reader knows will be resolved later on and so on.
4. If you think of a book as a house, then think of each chapter as a room in that house, and think of each paragraph as part of that room, the floor, the ceiling, the baseboards and so on. If that metaphor doesn't work, then think of the book as the facade of a 15-storey brick building. Each storey is a chapter, and each brick is a paragraph in that chapter. I want you to pull the wall down and reassemble it. You should always be asking yourself the question: where are we in the book and how did the author get me here? Where did she begin, where did she go next, and so on, then, stepping back, ask: are there any false steps here? Are there any unnecessary steps here?
5. If you catalog the subjects the author is writing about, you will see the structure, because, generally in non-fiction writers are trying to balance story with subject. For example, I've wrote a book about war that turns on many different subjects: American history in the early 20th century; Japanese history in the early 20th century; thermal dynamics of bombs; tropical diseases; death; hope; political betrayal; Douglas MacArthur; court-martial procedures...I could go on and on. In my book there are literally scores of subjects. As you catalog the subjects (this to reveal the structure of the book) you are also charting, charting the story. What happens when and in what sequence. How does the story proceed?
6. I want you to question the structure. What is chapter 3 chapter 3? Was that chapter necessary. Suggest an alternative structure if you can think of one. How else might the author have organized the topics, characters and stories in the book. So challenge the author every step of the way and well will challenge your challenges.

7. Structure is really a product of logic and intent. In other words, every author asks herself several questions: Where do I want to begin? Where do I want to go next. What's the best way of getting there? Are there several different ways to get there and if so which is the best one? Where does my material demand I begin? Do I have options? What are the consequences -- the implications -- of beginning here as opposed to beginning there?
8. Is there a way to describe the overall structure: chronological, topical, circular and so on. In your discussion of structure please remember this definition: A story is a sequence of events across time. We want you to show us that sequence and how it was built. The key usually is to discover how the author manages time. Does he create different time frames -- different story lines -- and run them consecutively? Or does he use another structure?
9. Another way to discover structure is to list the character and chart how the author introduces them. When does he walk them onto the page? How long do they hang around in the story? Does he take them off stage then bring them back. Where, why, how? Look for patterns, schemes, hidden outlines (clues the author leaves about what he intends to do next).
10. So, you catalog and chart the events (actions), then you do the same thing with the characters (or reverse the order if you like), then you make a note of the scenes, the locals, the space the author must manage. All narrative is a struggle to reconcile space and time.

**Language.** Learning to write well can be reduced to mastering two skills: designing a structure that fits the material and serves as a metaphor for meaning at the same time, and mastering THE SIMPLE DECLARATIVE SENTENCE. The SDS is the basic atomic unit of compelling non-fiction narrative. You can have the most ingenious structure in the world, but if your sentences don't read clearly, cleanly, precisely, elegantly, you will have a flawed book. Learning structure without trying to master the sentence is like trying to practice medicine with knowing basic physiology.

## What To Look For:

1. Begin by reading the guide. Please have it read thoroughly by next week. We are going to use the guide to try to discover the author's style, her store of tricks and techniques, the techniques of literature, which is to say making sentences, that she has used to create a piece of literary journalism. Here's how you begin to discover that style.
2. Start with syntax. All writers write in patterns. Their sentences have a distinct shape and structure. What are the hallmarks of this writer's syntax? Long sentences, short sentences, lots of dependent clauses or non-restrictive clauses, classic punctuation, no punctuation, active voice, passive voice, present tense, pluperfect tense, appositives, conditionals and so on and so on. If you don't know grammar, then you should learn it in the next three weeks. Go out and get Sheridan Baker's "Practical Stylist." Or, most useful to working writers, Edward Johnson's "The Handbook of Good English." And if you think you do know grammar, then maybe you're ready for the major leagues: "The Cambridge Book of Grammar," Huddleston and Pullum, or "A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language" by Quirk et al.
3. After syntax, I want you to highlight every figure of thought and figure of speech -- every single one of them. Pay particular attention to metaphors and similes. Nothing more reveals an author than her choice of devices such as metaphor, which is really a construct of the author's mind. (BTW, if your aim is to get out of the way between your subject and your reader, then you would not want to use metaphor, or adverbs for that matter, why?)
4. Diction. What kinds of words does the author use? Is her language formal, informal, off-hand and idiomatic, argot, what? For example, if I were to suggest a sentence such as: "Indeed, I was terrified, almost paralyzed with a fear so powerful and pervasive, I found myself unable to stray from the spot" -- what does that tell you about me as a writer? How else might I have expressed that notion. How about, "I was stiff with fear." The difference between the two is one of the secrets to making effective narrative sentences.
5. Look for the writer's pet words or expressions. Look for the ways the writer creates music in the sentence. Every sentence is a

blend of sound and sense. The sound should always amplify or extend the meaning or sense of the sentence. What devices create that music. Alliteration for one, consonance, assonance, poetic meter or rhythm. Perhaps the poets in the room will be able to help us on that score.

6. Overall I want you to be both quantitative and qualitative in your analysis. In other words, take the text apart and detail all, all the particulars I've mentioned, then gather these particulars together and assess the overall effect.

**The "Work" Writers do.** In narrative, you will be required to do different kinds of work. Being able to identify each type of "work" will help you take apart the structure of a work and help you build your own literary architecture.

#### What To Look For:

1. Setting -- A description of place. This is pure descriptive writing and includes the description of geography, topography, architecture, flora and fauna, weather, light and other elements of natural history or man-made objects and structures. The details of the way the place or thing looks. There is no action in setting. It is almost pure description.
2. Scene -- Scene is setting plus action, if there is any. For example, you are asked to describe the Washington Square Arch, create the setting there, the details of the arch, where it's situated, what it looks like at the time you viewed it. If you were asked to create the "scene" surrounding the Washington Square Arch, you would begin with setting (a shorter version of it), then add action: natural action such as wind or rain or snow etc; people milling about the arch and what they are saying or doing (singers and musicians often play there for the acoustics of the place), traffic on Washington Square North and coming down Fifth Avenue. NB: Setting and Scene are often referred to by the generic "description," but the work for the writer is different in each.
3. Background: This is the book (statistical, historical, literary, sociological, economic, scientific etc) research you do to deepen your readers' understanding of the subject. This material can either be woven into the text here and there as a kind of literary spice, or

it can be put together in asides and digression of various lengths. A monograph is the longest of these.

4. Monograph: A monograph is discourse on a single subject. Encyclopedia entries are monographs. So-called White Papers on policy or the law are monographs. Classic research papers are monographs. Monographs are often found in non-fiction narratives. They are easy to spot because they lack the one element necessary to create narrative – time. Sometimes the monograph is a chapter, sometimes a section within a chapter. The success of a monograph depends on three elements: the quality of the prose, the organization of the material, the “interest factor,” as it is sometimes called, of the information itself. Some writers rely on “fascinating facts” to drive their monographs forward. Others are able to create prose that reads like a story: simple declarative sentences that flow so logically one into the next, they drive forward and create the illusion of heading toward some conclusion or summary, though the monograph might not actually end that way. Think of a monograph as an essay told in the language of a narrative .
5. Explanation: (Or How Something Works) Here is where you stop in the narrative to explain something; i.e. the agribusiness of raising cattle, term life insurance, what happens when a bomb explodes (the thermal dynamics of a blast), how to peel an orange; how the heart works or the path of a blood clot to the brain. Sometimes explanation is part of a monograph, sometimes just a paragraph or two at a break in the narrative.
6. Simple Narrative: This is what writing coaches refer to as “telling” and “showing.” Simple narrative is the unfolding of some action and is controlled by the manipulation of time. Sometimes time is condensed; i.e., “In the late summer of 1940, Ben Steele was working as a camp tender at a large sheep outfit east of town. It was hard, sometimes filthy work, but the freedom of it made him happy—on his own every day, riding a horse or driving a rig between the far-flung camps of the shepherders, delivering mail and supplies, sleeping in the open, wrapped in an oilcloth, staring up at a big sky dark with bright stars.” And sometimes time is elongated and the story unfolds slowly. This is usually marked by the use of detail. “The wind was pushing against the windows of the big room in the main house, and Ben Steele lay there on his cot in the cold and dark, waiting. Any minute now the Old Man

would yell from the bedroom for him to get up and light the potbelly stove.”

7. Dramatic Narrative: This is either simple dialog or monolog (Often non-fiction writers will let their characters talk for a while, which is also called, “running transcript.) Writers regularly combine simple narrative and dramatic narrative:

“He pulled the comforter over his head, grabbed it against his chest.  
‘Bud?’  
He lay very still.  
‘You hear me, Bud?’  
He poked his face out now but kept his eyes shut tight against the cold.  
‘Damn it, Bud!’  
Off came the covers, noisily, so his father could hear.  
At least he’d remembered to cut kindling the night before.”

In pure dramatic narrative (dialog or monologue), real time and narrative time are equal. Again, in simple narrative, time is manipulated and never matches real time.

8. Establishing Persona (The narrator, the speaking voice): This almost always take place in the first few pages of the book, indeed, some argue from the first sentence on. But it is either reinforced or extended throughout the narrative. Whenever the persona pauses to reflect or conclude, the writer is giving the reader more of a picture of the speaking voice in the story. Persona is a complex concept, and there are a number of approaches to the subject and a number of critics have written about it at length. The first thing to remember is that the “voice,” as so many of the untutored prefer to call it, is a construct, something the writer creates. There is no such thing as a writer’s “natural voice.” Writers are constantly attempting to control how the narrator delivers the story and the information. A reader form a picture or impression of the narrator in his mind (often called the “implied author.”)
9. Riffs/Digressions/Asides: Think of these as small or even mini monographs, though they might not have the information and detail that characterizes monograph. A “riff” is simply the persona thinking out loud on the page for a few sentences. “All of this is memory, of course, the memory of the old ones who lived along the route, or their children and children’s children who tell and retell the stories of Bataan as if they were reciting from sacred texts. As the events of 1941–1942 passed into the hands of historians, both the battle for Bataan and the death march became

symbols, the former as a modern Thermopylae, a stirring last stand, and the latter as a crucible of courage, the courage to continue on a walk to the grave." A digression is usually used to deliver some small background or history or bit of culture: "It was not a lonely impulse of delight that had sent Saburo Sakai aloft to make tumult in the clouds. It was duty, a sense of obligation born of both politics and myth. The myth begins in heaven before the world was the world. Looking down one day, the celestial kami (gods) created a new domain: the Eight Great Islands at the Center Of The World, a misty land of emerald hills and jade valleys known to moderns as Dai Nippon, great Japan." An "aside" can be a short or medium-length comment by the narrator; in effect the narrator stops the narrative, figuratively steps aside, and comments, clarifies, or amplifies. "He'd been on that red dirt road a hundred times. And now as he stuck out his thumb at the approach of another car, he felt as if he was back where he'd started, back to ignorance. Folks used to say the road was red from all the family feuds in the hills, the bodies of the dead dumped on the red-dirt causeway like so much road-kill. It wasn't until a mining company showed up before the war that the locals learned they were living on a shelf of iron oxide. But even then, with the assay reports in their laps, they still talked about the road as a legacy of the bloody old days."

10. Transitions: This might be the most difficult "work" for book writers. You have the customary work of writing transitions between paragraphs, something all writers working in all genres and forms (except poetry) must do on every page. But in long-form narrative, you must also consider the transitions between sections within a chapter, the transitions between chapters, the transitions between parts of the book. In other words, every rhetorical unit or unit of discourse must be bracketed by transitions.
11. Reporting (interviewing, archival research, observation): Although these three categories of "work" do not bear directly on the actual crafting of a piece, they represent some of the most difficult work in the book. A writer of non-fiction must figure out a way to blend what she learns in the field from interviewing and observing with what she learns in the library or special archive or public records. You are telling a story, but you are also delivering information, and the two tasks sometimes seem inimical. The blending takes place when the writer has a good design, or structure, for the book. And the way to deliver information without losing the reader

is to create a prose that is both easy and compelling to read, a prose where every sentence throws the reader forward to the next sentence. Most writers search for answers to these problems and models to emulate in other books. Writers do not read for pleasure – though that is often a byproduct of a well-crafted book – they read to steal. They try to take what has already been done and do it better or differently. To them, every book they read is a textbook on writing. They read like writers, not readers. Remember the advice of Cormac McCarthy and others: all good books are built on the backs of other good books.