

**STO**



**RY**



**TEACHING  
TEENS TO USE  
THE TOOLS OF  
NARRATIVE TO  
ARGUE AND  
INFORM**

**MATT**



**ERS**



**Liz Prather**

Foreword by **KELLY GALLAGHER**

**HEINEMANN  
PORTSMOUTH, NH**

**Heinemann**

361 Hanover Street  
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912  
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

© 2019 by Elizabeth Prather

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

*Heinemann's authors have devoted their entire careers to developing the unique content in their works, and their written expression is protected by copyright law. We respectfully ask that you do not adapt, reuse, or copy anything on third-party (whether for-profit or not-for-profit) lesson sharing websites.*

—**Heinemann Publishers**

“Dedicated to Teachers” is a trademark of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

The author and publisher wish to thank those who have generously given permission to reprint borrowed material:

“The Case for Leaving City Rats Alone” by Rebecca Cudmore from *Nautilus* (Issue 038; July 28, 2016). Copyright © 2016 by Rebecca Cudmore. Published by NautilusThink. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Excerpt from “Living Will” in *Incidental Findings* by author and physician, Danielle Ofri. Copyright © 2005 by Danielle Ofri. Published by Beacon Press. Used by permission of the author. www.daniellofri.com.

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-0-325-09950-7

**Acquisitions Editor:** Katie Wood Ray

**Production Editor:** Sean Moreau

**Cover and Interior Designer:** Suzanne Heiser

**Typesetter:** Valerie Levy, Drawing Board Studios

**Manufacturing:** Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

23 22 21 20 19 RWP 1 2 3 4 5

For Kenn Johnson,  
a writer first,  
and a teacher always

Sample pages

# CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Kelly Gallagher</i> .....	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	xv

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	xvii
My Story .....	xvii

## CHAPTER ONE

<b>NARRATIVE AS HOME BASE, GROUND ZERO, MOTHER SHIP</b> .....	1
The Necessity of Narrative in Argument and Information .....	3
Narrative Skill at Work: An Expert Mentor Text .....	9
Narrative Tools at Work in Student Writing .....	22
How to Use This Book .....	26

## CHAPTER TWO

<b>IDEAS</b> Finding Stories in Topics and Topics in Stories .....	28
Exercises for Finding Narrative Connections .....	29
<i>Universal Time Line</i> .....	29
<i>Your Life at a Glance</i> .....	32
<i>The 100 Topics Project</i> .....	39
<i>The Power of Questioning</i> .....	46
<i>Find Your Story in the Big Questions</i> .....	52
<i>Find Your Story in the Big Premises</i> .....	53
<i>Be an Idea Collector</i> .....	55
<i>Be an Internet Scavenger</i> .....	56

## CHAPTER THREE

<b>CHARACTERS</b> Grounding Nonfiction in Human Stories .....	58
<b>Finding Characters in Nonfiction</b> .....	60
<i>Understanding the Different Work Characters Can Do</i> .....	60
<i>Characters Don't Have to Be Human</i> .....	62
<i>Using Research to Bring Characters to Life</i> .....	64
<i>The Writer as Character</i> .....	66
<i>Leading with a Character</i> .....	67
<i>Using Characters as Supporting Evidence</i> .....	69
<i>Using a Character as an Example of Theme</i> .....	70
<i>Using a Character as a Subject</i> .....	71
<i>Following a Peripheral Character</i> .....	73
<i>Ending with a Character</i> .....	74
<b>Revealing Characters in Nonfiction</b> .....	76
<i>Crafting Physical Descriptions</i> .....	76
<i>Crafting Dialogue</i> .....	80
<i>Crafting Action</i> .....	82

## CHAPTER FOUR

<b>TENSION</b> Propelling Readers Forward in Nonfiction .....	84
<b>Tools for Creating Tension in Information and Argument</b> ....	86
<i>A Powerful Opening Line</i> .....	87
<i>A Character in a Tense Situation</i> .....	89
<i>The Forward Motion of a Question</i> .....	91
<i>Things Are Not as They Seem</i> .....	92
<i>The Clock Is Ticking</i> .....	94
<i>Across Place and Time</i> .....	96
<i>The Mystery of Foreshadowing</i> .....	97
<i>Standing in the Shoes of a Character</i> .....	99

## CHAPTER FIVE

<b>STRUCTURE</b> Weaving Narrative, Argumentation, and Information into Seamless, Purposeful Writing .....	101
<b>Examining Structure in Mentor Texts</b> .....	103
<i>Questioning</i> .....	104
<i>Listing</i> .....	105
<i>Mapping</i> .....	106
<i>Naming</i> .....	109
<i>Leading</i> .....	110
<i>Transitioning</i> .....	110
<i>Assembling</i> .....	112
<i>Considering What's Not There</i> .....	113
<b>Practice, Practice, Practice</b> .....	115
<i>Know Your Through-Line</i> .....	115
<i>Try Different Arrangements</i> .....	116
<i>Play Around with Time</i> .....	118

## CHAPTER SIX

<b>DETAILS</b> Showing and Telling in Nonfiction .....	121
<b>The Power of the Particular Detail</b> .....	122
<b>The Power of the Purposeful Detail</b> .....	124
<b>Teaching Students to Select Details</b> .....	126
<i>Examining Details in Mentor Texts</i> .....	126
<i>Details of Character</i> .....	128
<i>Details of Action</i> .....	130
<i>Details of Place</i> .....	131
<i>Details of Time</i> .....	132
<i>Details as Examples</i> .....	135
<i>Details of Information</i> .....	136
<i>Details of Argument</i> .....	138
<i>Winnowing the Details of a Draft</i> .....	140

## CHAPTER SEVEN

<b>LANGUAGE</b> Crafting Words and Sentences for Powerful Effect	142
Looking Closely at Language: Three Powerful Examples	143
<b>Word Choice</b>	146
<i>Why This Word?</i>	147
<i>Why This Figurative Language?</i>	148
<i>Understanding Connotation and Denotation</i>	150
<i>Eliminating Clichés</i>	153
<i>Bigger Is Not Necessarily Better</i>	154
<b>Sentence Craft</b>	155
<i>Experiment with Models</i>	156
<i>Make Good Sentences Great</i>	160
<i>Allow Students to Find Their Own Style and Improve Upon It</i>	161
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	163
In the Real World	163
<b>APPENDIX A</b>	166
Narrative Nonfiction: A Three- to Six-Week Sample Unit Plan	166
<b>APPENDIX B</b>	169
A Source List of Texts for Teaching Narrative Nonfiction	169
<b>REFERENCES</b>	176

# FORE WORD

Early in my teaching career, the United States invaded Iraq in Operation Desert Storm, and my students—some of whom had already committed to joining the military after high school—were anxious and eager to understand the first major foreign crisis of their young lives. I sensed an opportunity to engage them, so I made the on-the-fly decision to put our upcoming study of *Hamlet* on the back burner and, instead, I sat at home all weekend excitedly planning a war unit. I pulled together a number of interesting artifacts for them to study, and to anchor this unit, I decided we would read Erich Maria Remarque’s classic war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

I arrived fired up to class on Monday morning. By now, my students had heard that Saddam Hussein, ruler of Iraq, had been accused of using poison gas on civilian populations. I decided this was a good entry point; it would be interesting to show them the horror and devastation inflicted by the use of poison gas when it was first used in World War I. I can’t remember the exact encyclopedia passage I had dug up from almost thirty years ago for them to study, but it was similar to this current entry found on Wikipedia:

Chemical weapons “. . . were primarily used to demoralize, injure, and kill entrenched defenders, against whom the indiscriminate and generally very slow-moving or static nature of gas clouds would be most effective. The types of weapons employed ranged from disabling chemicals, such as tear gas, to lethal agents like phosgene, chlorine, and mustard gas. This chemical warfare was a major component of the first global war and first total war of the twentieth century. The killing capacity of gas was limited, with about 90,000 fatalities from a total of 1.3 million casualties caused by gas attacks.”

I found this information fascinating. My students didn't. They dutifully asked a few perfunctory questions, feigned minimal interest, and, despite *my* interest, made it clear they were ready to move on. As they walked out the door at the end of the period, I remember being perplexed by their indifference, by their disengagement—I mean, c'mon people! *Soldiers were gassed!*

Flash-forward one year. Same unit. But instead of having students read the encyclopedia entry, I shared a firsthand account from William Pressey, a WWI soldier who had experienced the horror of being gassed. Pressey writes:

I was awakened by a terrible crash. The roof came down on my chest and legs and I couldn't move anything but my head. I thought, "So, this is it then." I found I could hardly breathe. (Carey 1998, 473)

My students perked up a bit in their seats. I continued reading as Pressey recounts regaining consciousness while others forced a gas mask on him. He recalls choking, suggesting that he resembled a fish with its mouth open gasping for air. Pressey remembers his lungs shutting down and his heart pounding hard, and his last memory before blacking out was glancing at a comrade placed right next to him who had green stuff oozing from the side of his mouth.

I paused, and then asked my students to finish reading the soldier's horrific account. While they read, it became eerily quiet. The good kind of quiet. The kind of quiet that left no doubt students were glued to the text. And when they emerged from their reading, we had a spirited discussion about the ethics of weaponry in war. All these years later, I still remember the heat of that conversation.

This experience early in my teaching career taught me one very valuable lesson: Human beings learn deeply through the power of story. Yes, my students understood that poison gas was used in WWI, but they did not really *understand* it until they read the history from the soldier's point of view. It was his *story* that deepened their understanding and appreciation of history.

Yet, here we sit, many years later, and the reading, writing, and study of story is *still* not getting its proper due in our schools. It has been disrespected by the Common Core and by many states that have developed and adopted their own standards. Curriculum directors, who often see narrative writing as "softer" than argumentative or analytical writing, have devalued it. And some English teachers,

who believe their job is to teach the traditional literary analysis paper ad infinitum, have discounted it.

This shortchanging of story has deep and lasting consequences. It deprives our students of developing critical key writing skills, it weakens their agency, and it silences their voices. For these reasons—and others—we need to reestablish the importance of story in our classrooms, and this is where I am hopeful that Liz Prather’s excellent new book, *Story Matters*, will serve as a catalyst for a shift in our thinking about the teaching of narrative.

The book’s superpower is that it clearly demonstrates how the weaving of narrative elements strengthens all kinds of writing, from arguments to informative and explanatory papers. As Prather points out, “You would be hard pressed to find any text that didn’t employ some narrative technique” (3). Narrative is everywhere, and recognizing this is the first step to stop treating it as a separate, stand-alone discourse. In these pages, Prather shows us how to weave narrative into other genres in ways that makes student writing come alive. This book is smart and makes a compelling argument, but beyond that, it is also practical, and I particularly appreciate its numerous exercises and mentor texts I can use in my classroom to enable my students to tap into the power of story.

*Story Matters* also reminds us that strong writing “moves” are not genre-specific. A student who develops a strong voice, or a knack for vibrant sensory detail, or who uses dialogue effectively while writing a narrative piece, will use these same skills when later writing an argumentative or an expository essay. This is why I always start my school year with a narrative unit. Yes, I’m seeking the engagement that is generated when students are given an opportunity to tell their stories, but beyond that, I know that if my kids begin the year by learning to write narratives well, they will acquire writing skills that can be applied to *all* writing situations. These skills are foundational and universal; they are not tied to a specific genre.

I also appreciate that this book encourages teachers and students to move away from formulaic and scripted writing. Prather recognizes that students do not learn to write well by practicing “hamburger” paragraphs or by writing five-paragraph essays. Instead of these approaches, she notes students need lots of mentor texts to read, analyze, and emulate so that they develop “an awareness of

the possibilities of expository architecture.” They also need lots of coaching while they practice, practice, practice.

In other words, learning to write well is hard. There are no shortcuts, and I like how this book embraces this hardness in a way that helps break the unhealthy codependency that young writers often develop with their teachers. Generative writing is not the same thing as compliant writing, and if students make this shift toward generative writing, they need to make the shift toward generating their own decisions. This book is a blueprint on how to make this critical shift: Find texts that expertly weave in narrative elements, have students closely study and emulate them, write alongside your students, model students’ thinking, and encourage young writers to make key decisions as they draft and revise. This is the real work of writing teachers.

As I write this foreword, I sit at my desk with only ten days of school remaining, and I am in that state of zombie-like tiredness familiar to teachers during this time of year. Yet, while rereading *Story Matters* this morning, I feel an energy—a buzz of excitement—that comes whenever I read a professional development book that is more than just another “strategies book.” *Story Matters* is much more than that. It asks you to reconsider your definition of *genre*, and after you have done so, it will provide you with the tools needed to unleash the potent power of story in your classroom.

They say that a good story should change you. The stories Liz Prather tells in these pages will change my classroom next year. They will change yours, too.

—Kelly Gallagher

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to Kenn Johnson, a teacher I met in 1996 when we both taught at Montgomery County High School in Mount Sterling, Kentucky. Kenn was the first teacher I had met who was a writer and a teacher. Everything he did in his classroom was filtered through his writer-self: Is this what I do as a writer? Is this authentic? He was the full-time sports editor for our small-town newspaper, *The Mt. Sterling Advocate*, covering every game for every sport, plus writing a weekly column called "Sidelines." He also taught English full time and put out an award-winning student newspaper every month with his journalism students. His program was known statewide, graduating writers and photographers who now work in media all over the United States. One of his students, now the photo editor for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, recently said of Kenn, "If you drove up by the high school on any weeknight, the light in the journalism room would always be on. You knew Mr. Johnson was in there working."

Throughout my career, I've used Kenn's columns as mentor texts, and he's been my writing-teaching role model for many years. I am so grateful for his wisdom and his work, and I'm honored to call him my dear friend.

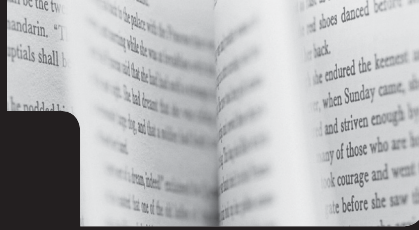
Amanda Wright, my colleague at Lafayette High School, read an early version of this book and lined the manuscript with beautiful questions that helped me connect the dots between theory and practice. I'm thankful for her time and insight. Lafayette High School media specialist Susie Joliffe is a former English teacher, whose assistance in finding mentor texts and hard-to-find resources plus offering to track down random facts for me make her my personal hero. I'm going to miss her indomitable spirit and smiling face next year when she retires.

Many thanks also to Stacy Lyons who commutes down Interstate 64 with me. For two years, she's listened to me break down every teeth-gnashing detail of my efforts to bring this book together. She kept me sane and preached peace and love every mile of the way.

As always, I'm grateful to the students of Room 303. I am honored you have given so much of yourselves to the work we do together. To the class of 2018, Taleah, Michael, David, John, Jenna, Leila, Ruby, Avery, Katrin, and Duncan, I salute your indefatigable life force and the many worlds you spun into existence. To the girls of the class of 2019, McKenna, Autumn, Eliza, Taylor, and Sarah, your leadership, kindness, talent, and grit humble me to the earth.

The problems of writing a book about the highly individualized process of writing is second only to writing a book about the highly individualized process of teaching writing. So many times in this book, I could not see my way, but my editor, Katie Wood Ray, offered her gift of vision, her ear that listens closely, and her kitchen island that could support the weight of a reeling, overwritten chapter. She sought to understand not only what I was saying, but what I was *trying* to say. Katie's questions illuminated this book for me, and I'm so thankful for her guidance.

And finally, immeasurable thanks to my family—John, Cassie, Harper, Hadley, Hudson, Hagan, Harrison—I love you so much. And to my perfect partner, Paul David—you are my everything.



# INTRODUCTION

## MY STORY

Perhaps the fastest growing kind of writing in print and online is narrative nonfiction. It's versatile, engaging, and ubiquitous: newspapers, magazines, journals, e-singles, mixed media, lyrical essays, hypertext, and long- and short-form essays. It's the kind of writing that leads to self-discovery and asks students to join in a larger public conversation.

Narrative nonfiction asks students to take risks and to learn how to compositionally zig and zag between information, argument, and story. It requires students to see writing as an exercise in problem-solving and to consider their own experience as a starting place for engaging with a subject.

This book is designed for the classroom teacher looking for resources, mentor texts, lessons, and ideas to help students learn how to blend narrative into informative and argumentative texts.

Whenever I read a professional book, the whole time I'm reading it, I'm wondering where the writer's teaching philosophy came from or what the writer's teaching situation is like. So before we launch into the book proper, I feel the need to tell you where I come from.

This is my story.





As a kid, all I wanted to do was write. Yet writer wasn't among the approved professions my sensible farming mother was willing to pay tuition for. Becoming a teacher was a much better career decision.

In 1990, I started teaching high school English in a tiny school in rural Kentucky. Kindergarten through twelfth grade were housed in a single two-story building; the senior class had twenty-eight kids. My first year was a nightmare. After one academic year, I left the profession and swore I would never teach again. However, a few years later, I was back at it. This time around I had the support of veteran teachers and a great administrator. I loved it, but the dream of being a writer was still with me.

After thirteen years of teaching, I decided to move to Austin and begin work on an MFA at the University of Texas. During my three years there, I wrote a dozen short stories, two screenplays, a horrific novel that will never see the light of day, and the first five chapters of a memoir. I supported myself financially as a writer and supplemented my income by teaching writing at retreats and professional seminars.

When my mother became ill in 2007, I returned to Kentucky and became the writer-in-residence at Morehead State University, where I taught composition and creative writing and directed the Morehead Writing Project. I enjoyed this professional work, but when an English position opened up at a nearby high school, I jumped at the chance. I missed teaching high school students. During this time, I continued to write fiction and also wrote freelance articles for local and regional magazines.

Later, when a position to teach writing at a high school magnet program in a nearby urban district opened up, I jumped again. Now I teach a group of highly motivated high school writers. I have political and foodie bloggers; music and theatre journalists; screenwriters, sports writers, and songwriters; students who write local reviews of music, movies, and video games; another who writes faith-based devotionals for teens; and another who writes online content for local equine media.

I tell you this so you'll know I am a professional writer and that I work in a unique situation: I teach writing every day in ninety-minute blocks in classes of twenty to twenty-five kids using both a traditional curriculum and a project-based writing framework where students generate writing projects of their own, pitch their ideas, and then publish them for an authentic audience. I wrote about this framework in my first book, *Project-Based Writing: Teaching Writers to Manage Time and Clarify Purpose* (2017).

I want you to know I understand the constraints of a traditional English language arts classroom where I taught for seventeen years, and I understand the limited time

you have to devote to any kind of writing, outside of the on-demand response or the five-paragraph essay.

But I also know what it feels like to pretend in front of students that those forms of writing are the only ones they need to master to succeed in college and career and to pretend that those forms of writing are even remotely important or real for any other audience outside academia.

If we're only teaching students how to survive writing in the next academic phase of their life ("You'll need to know this in middle school," "You'll need to know this in high school," "You'll need to know this in college"), then why are we even fretting over the craft of writing at all? Shouldn't we just teach them to download forms and be done with it?

But most of us, I know, are trying to teach students how to communicate in life as well as in college and careers. To be able to think clearly. To actually write to another person. To make writerly decisions for a more authentic audience than just the teacher, such as a prospective employer, a community group, a beloved family member, or the whole world reading your online blog.

I also want you to know that in every department I've ever worked, at every level of education, there have been two distinct camps: those who teach writing by the law and those who practice by lawlessness. The law-thumpers want to make sure students can identify every part of speech and have memorized the five-paragraph essay form before they turn them loose with an idea. They see themselves as the guardians of the language and often feel superior to the lawless.

The lawless, in turn, usually feel sorry for the law-thumpers, seeing them as uptight, rigid moralizers who keep kids in bondage. The lawless prefer to throw some prompts on the board, turn on one of the Bobs (Marley or Dylan), and let the words floooow.

If you've spent any time in any English department anywhere, you might be trying to figure out where I stand in this dichotomy. I will tell you I'm squarely in the middle. I am a relentless sentence reviser and teach my students to hold themselves to standards of clarity and simplicity. But I also refuse to put learning targets on my board, and I think boxing in something as madcap and chaotic as the individual writing process in a one-sentence objective is ludicrous.

Although I often use classic essays, I believe students need to read high-quality, contemporary texts from living writers about current topics they are interested in and relate to. Although I teach grammar and usage, I believe students need to figure out how a sentence works using their own sentences, not someone else's. Although I offer

examples of voice and style, I also encourage students to find their own style, which is, as Zadie Smith (2007) says, “a personal necessity, as the only possible expression of a particular human consciousness.”

Another large component of my teaching practice and philosophy is that I’m a writer myself. I approach writing as a writer, not as a teacher. I ask myself: is this an activity or exercise or task I would do as a writer? Or is this activity just checking a box for school—getting a grade for the gradebook, looking good for a walk-through, keeping them busy, keeping them in their seat?

I cannot stress enough that you will be more successful at teaching writers if you also write and do so consistently. Writing is a performance art, one that can’t be learned by only observing others do it. Before you launch a unit that requires your students to write anything, write that thing first yourself. Before you adopt the lessons and suggestions I make in this book, have a go yourself. Submit a piece to *The English Journal* if you want. Or write your own blog. Or share something you’ve written with a group of writing teachers at your school or in your district. The lessons you learn about yourself as a writer and as a teacher of writers will be priceless and will improve every single product you ask your students to attempt.

And one more thing before we jump into the book: I’m not as concerned that my students “get it right” as I’m concerned they *practice* getting it right. Getting it right is an ambition that even professional writers fail at. Every time I read an old article I’ve written, I cringe at half a dozen glaring errors I see on the page. But I keep showing up, practicing this skill, trying to become better.

I want students to *practice* writing every day, making their own decisions, failing and learning from that failure, and continuing to follow, as Smith (2007) says, the “map of disappointments . . . to the land where writers live.” That’s how students “get it right.”

I have a standard for teaching and writing because I am a teacher and a writer. If we teach from the belief that our students are already writers, if we believe they have a significant contribution to the world in the form of their style, their ideas, their communication, they will develop a standard for their own work as well. That standard will be informed by the work I do as a coach and a mentor working alongside them. That standard will be informed by the reading they are exposed to in my class, both self-selected and teacher-selected. And that standard will be shaped by how many opportunities they have to fail and fail successfully to keep on improving.



## CHAPTER ONE

# NARRATIVE AS HOME BASE, GROUND ZERO, MOTHER SHIP

When I was six years old, I wrote my first short story. At four sentences long, the narrative centered on the epic drama of a rainstorm threatening the day's laundry on the line.

It went like this: *Mother said the rains are coming. Come here Mary you get the clothespins. Mike you get the clothes off the line. And Liz you help Mary get the clothespins. The End.*

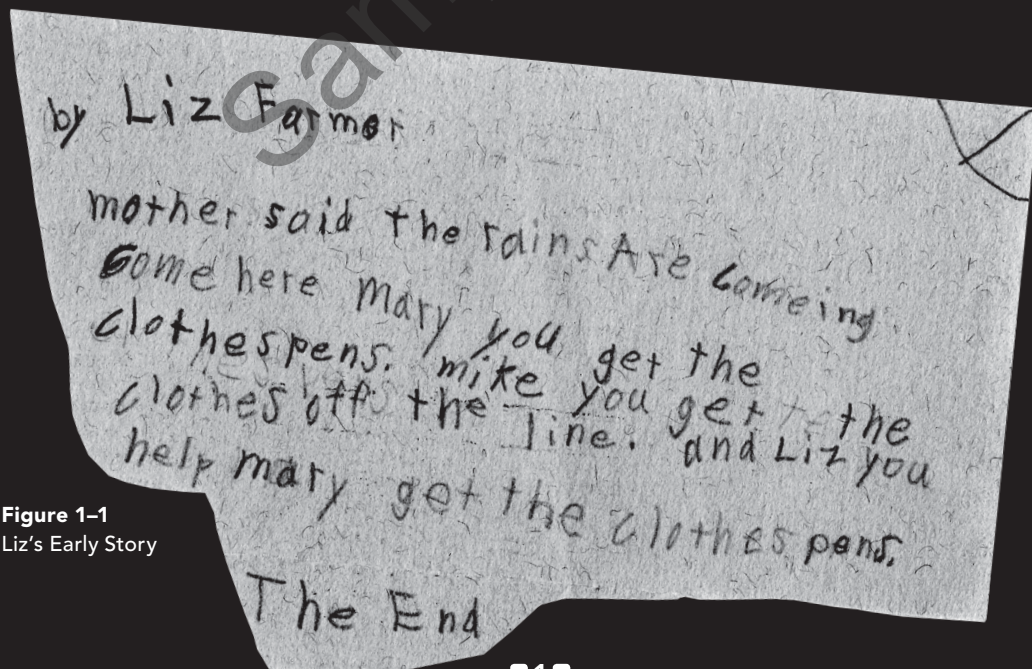


Figure 1-1  
Liz's Early Story

There are four characters: Mother, my sister Mary, my brother Mike, and me. There's no thematic overture, merely an opening sequence that establishes the problem: the rains are coming. There's no elaborate scene craft. Like all good minimalist works, the story works in subtlety and nuance.

So, why did I write it? Who knows? I don't remember writing it, but there it was, sitting in a box of school work and report cards I found in the attic of my childhood home. Was the story a labor narrative, a cautionary tale, or merely a record of the afternoon laundry as the most dramatic thing happening on Possum Ridge?

Even at that early age, I had a desire perhaps to preserve the truths of my life for future generations. For whatever reason I wrote it, its existence speaks to the larger human activity of storytelling, the urge and need to chronicle our lives.

We are "storytelling animals," says author Jonathan Gottschall (2012) in his book of the same title. "Story is the glue of human social life." In every known human culture, storytelling binds communities with gossip, warning, and instruction. Gottschall writes, "It nourishes our imaginations; it reinforces moral behavior; it gives us safe worlds to practice inside" (177). Early narratives carried important information regarding water and food sources, deadly plants, predators, and natural disasters. Stories help us make sense of our existence. As Natalie Goldberg (1986) says in *Writing Down the Bones*, our stories say, "We were here; we are human beings; this is how we lived. Let it be known, the earth passed before us" (43).

Marketing and media use this venerable form of communication. Our news, especially a dramatically poised event such as the Olympics or the NCAA Final Four, features human stories. Author Christopher Booker (2004) says, "These structured sequences of imagery are, in fact, the most natural way we know to describe everything which happens in our lives" (2). Business writer Carmine Gallo (2016) maintains the key to the success of Starbucks' Howard Schultz, Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg, and Apple cofounder Steve Jobs was their mastery of the corporate narrative. All TED talks dip into the personal story, specifically the sharing of the speaker's own journey. From Shakespeare to Springsteen to the popularity of Dave Isay's *Storycorps* and Brandon Staton's *Humans of New York*, we love stories.

And yet, as one of the oldest and most powerful communication tools at our disposal, narrative is seen as secondary in post-elementary education. Although the Common Core recommends narrative writing in the fourth grade comprise 35 percent of all writing tasks, by the time students ascend to their senior year of high school, narrative writing opportunities have fallen off to 20 percent while argumentative and informative enterprises balloon to 40 percent each. Right now, in Kentucky where I

teach, I've heard serious conversations about cutting the narrative standards entirely or using narrative only as a support for argumentative or informational texts. This is certainly on the mind of many teachers in my building. Maybe this is happening in other states as well. The bottom line is, as Tom Newkirk (2014) points out in *Mind Made for Stories*, a conflict exists “between the way we treat narrative in school and the central role it plays in our consciousness” (5).

## **THE NECESSITY OF NARRATIVE IN ARGUMENT AND INFORMATION**

The narrative finds itself caught in a pedagogical tussle: too vital to be ignored entirely, but too simplistic for any instructional real estate. In 2011, David Coleman, one of the lead developers of the Common Core, voiced this shift to a group of teachers during a professional development event. He asked the audience what they thought the most popular forms of writing in high school were. The audience responded, personal narratives and personal opinion pieces. The problem with that, according to Coleman, was that “as you grow up in this world, you realize that people really don't give a shit about what you feel or what you think” (10).

Coleman's statement, while designed to provoke, was primarily meant to illustrate the notion that narratives are for children, and once students grow up, they should graduate to the rigors of analysis and facts of the real world. Yet I cannot think of one human institution, from art to science to politics to religion to law, that is not predicated on the story of the human experience, ergo what people think and feel.

If narratives—built on the thoughts and feelings of a writer to connect with the thoughts and feelings of a reader—were abandoned in favor of strict analysis, pure information, or classic argumentation, American corporations and politicians would be adrift. They care very deeply about how we feel and think to the tune of billions of dollars spent annually on advertising campaigns that persuade us to think and feel certain ways, regularly using story as a trigger for brand identification. We only have to look at the success of the powerful two-word story in Subaru's latest campaign, “They lived,” to understand that narrative is a vital tool in the grown-up world for which Coleman wants American graduates to be prepared. In fact, you would be hard pressed to find any text that didn't employ some narrative technique, including textbooks, news stories, medical journals, travel guides, political speeches, social and historical analysis, and even scientific lab reports.

The problem with casting off narrative as too “creative” for the exacting terrain of adult writing tasks is that writing in the real world doesn’t divide itself neatly into categories. Professional writers approach writing tasks with all modes at their disposal. They may dip into any text type if it helps them say what they want to say.

In a recent *New York Times* piece, Richard Oppel and Jugal K. Patel (2019) discuss public defenders all over the United States with excessive caseloads. We are introduced to Jack Talaska, a Louisiana public defender, who’s struggling to provide services for the 194 felony cases on his desk; we meet Bob Marro, a public defender from Providence, Rhode Island, with equally mind-boggling numbers. The authors cite studies and statistics. They use analysis, and at the center of the piece is a subtle argument that a standard must be developed “that will help judges and policy makers determine how many cases public defenders can ethically handle before their clients’ rights are violated.”

How would we characterize this piece of writing? It’s nonfiction with narrative anecdotes, characters, and scenes, but there are also facts, and, although not a classic argument, we see certain rhetorical appeals for a commonsense approach to address the public defender caseload problem.

How would we characterize Tom Vanderbilt’s (2008) *Traffic* or Margot Lee Shetterly’s (2016) *Hidden Figures*? These texts enlighten the reader through stories using data and scientific research surrounding a critical argument (about human behavior in traffic and about racism and sexism in scientific fields) that serves as the beating heart of the work.

Consider Rebecca Skloot’s (2011) *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, which features a narrative plot about Lacks’ life that educates the reader about HeLa cells while delivering an argument about race and medical ethics. Is Skloot’s book a narrative? Yes. Is it an argument? Yes. Is it an informational text? Absolutely. As Newkirk (2014) observes:

Even the arguments we make are often about a version of story, or in the service of story, or in the form of a story. Evidence regularly serves to establish which story, which claim for causality, is most plausible. We critique a story by imagining another story. Informational texts regularly describe processes (evolution, the autoimmune system, photosynthesis, global warning) that take narrative form. (145)

The truth is, effective writing must embrace all of it. A student writer should understand how to use the modes of argument, narration, and information, not as discrete arrangements exclusive of other patterns, but as a smorgasbord of delivery methods used in the service of communication.

Scan the current *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list to get a contemporary survey of how professional writers use narrative. As I am drafting this chapter, *Killing England*, Bill O'Reilly's story of the American Revolution, sits at number one. Hillary Rodham Clinton's political memoir *What Happened* sits at number two, her narrative argument about the events preceding, during, and following the 2016 election.

The list includes five memoirs, but it also includes several cultural studies wherein narrative is prominently featured, including Geoffrey Ward's *The Vietnam War* and Denise Kiernan's *The Last Castle*, an exploration of the history of the Biltmore House, and several political polemics such as Sharyl Attkisson's *The Smear*, Jonathan Cahn's *The Paradigm*, and Kurt Andersen's *Fantasyland*.

Because narrative is, as Newkirk (2014) says, the “mother of all modes” (6), every writer on the best-seller list employs its tools to make their central argument or deliver critical information to support the aims of their book. Because those writers think and feel. And they know their readers do too.

An intimate knowledge of narrative technique then is essential when reading or writing any subject matter. Understanding history or science, for example, is an exercise in narrative discernment, peeling away the story within a story within a story to find some truth about what it means to be human. Asking students to tell a true story—about the Great Barrier Reef, the battle of Vicksburg, Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*—requires them to engage the reader using the techniques of narrative, support their argument with research, and showcase their knowledge of the world through information. These are the compositional moves that accomplished writers possess.

Compare the two following entries in Figure 1–2 describing Boston Corbett, the man who killed John Wilkes Booth. Text A is a typical biographical entry I wrote for the purposes of comparison from information I found on Wikipedia. Text B is Ernest B. Furgurson's (2009) essay “The Man Who Shot the Man Who Shot Lincoln.” Our eye immediately jumps at Text B that promises the hook-and-roll of a story. Even the first two words “One morning” asks us to lean in and listen to its narrative invitation.

Furgurson's opening paragraph showcases several classic storytelling moves, namely grounding the reader in time and giving the reader a description of a character. Whatever argument Furgurson might make or whatever information he might impart in his essay will be highlighted by this initial narrative image in the mind of the reader.

Corbett was an interesting, eccentric historical character, but Furgurson still must create his story from research, official reports, transcripts, and documents, and figure out how to arrange them for dramatic or rhetorical effect. The essay itself is bound to

**TEXT A**

Thomas H. ("Boston") Corbett was born in London, England, in 1832. Along with his family, he came to New York in 1839. He eventually became a hatter in Troy. He married but his wife died in childbirth. Later he moved to Boston and continued working as a hatter there. Some have speculated that the use of mercury in the hatters' trade was a causative factor in Corbett's later mental problems.

**TEXT B**

One morning in September, 1878, a tired traveler, five feet four inches tall, with a wispy beard, arrived at the office of the daily Pittsburgh Leader. His vest and coat were a faded purple, and his previously black pants were gray with age and wear. As he stepped inside, he lifted a once fashionable silk hat to disclose brown hair parted down the middle like a woman's. Despite the mileage that showed in his face and clothes, he was well-kept, and spoke with clarity.

**Figure 1-2** Text Comparison

fact, but Furgurson spins a tale about this little-known player in American history by pulling the reader forward with the subtextual question embedded in the first sentence: Why did Corbett show up at the Pittsburgh Leader one morning in September 1878? This is why narrative is so powerful for any writing task: it pulls us in, sets us up, and drives us forward.

In my classroom, we call this kind of writing narrative nonfiction, and I define it for my students as a piece of nonfiction, such as an informational or argumentative text, that uses a story or a few narrative techniques to engage the reader. This form of nonfiction might also be referred to as creative nonfiction or literary journalism. Of course, most journalism does not tell stories; it reports the news, weather, box scores, and so on. But the kind of journalism that is read and remembered uses a human story at its center.

In this kind of writing, journalists, essayists, writers of long and short forms write literacy narratives, labor narratives, sports narratives, teaching narratives, travel narratives, medical narratives, and so on. Although traditionally associated with memoir and personal essays, narrative nonfiction has more recently been used as a vehicle for classic

argumentation, as well as social, political, or cultural criticism. Digital storytelling is also a nonfiction genre that uses the same narrative techniques coupled with video, music, charts, memes, infographics, and embedded Instagram and Twitter posts.

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is an early example of this kind of writing, which made way for nonfiction writers like Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Hunter S. Thompson, and Gay Talese to immerse themselves in the stories they reported, using characters, dialogue, setting, and plot to render a nonfiction subject. The subtitle of *Creative Nonfiction*, a literary journal founded and edited by the godfather of the creative nonfiction movement Lee Gutkind, expresses the definition I use most often: narrative nonfiction is "a true story, well told."

I avoid calling this kind of writing creative nonfiction. There's nothing wrong with that moniker, but slap the term *creative* on anything and it seems to automatically lessen how academically serious an administrator or curriculum coach perceives the work to be. (What seems to be at issue is the oft mythologized and highly romantic notion that "creative" writing comes from some pixie-dust landscape deep within our subconscious, accessed only by drugs, alcohol, or writing prompts like "pretend you're a butterfly," and other forms of writing that come to us from a cerebral spreadsheet where statistics, immutable truths, and logically linked claims are high-stepping with flawless military precision. But that's another topic for another time.)

My students and I use the term *narrative nonfiction* because it makes sense for what we are trying to do: using story to engage the reader to deliver information or an argument.

# SOURCES OF NARRATIVE NONFICTION

You can find examples of this kind of writing in almost every U.S. magazine or newspaper in print and online. Narrative nonfiction pops up regularly in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, or *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

Ask your media specialist to purchase The Best American series for your school's media center. The Best American series is published annually and is a collection of the year's best nonfiction essays in science, sports, travel, and nature writing that have been published in a wide range of magazines such as *Pacific Standard*, *Mother Jones*, *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *Nautilus*, *Wired*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Scientific American*, *BuzzFeed News*, *National Geographic*, *Outside*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Psychology Today*, *Natural History*, *Newsweek*, *The Atlantic*, *Audubon*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Orion*, and *Esquire*.

For short pieces that students can read on their cell phones, I find great stuff in curated online publishing platforms like *Matter.com*, *Longform.org*, *Narratively.com*, and *Medium.com*, with articles on science, technology, culture, health, music, food, and politics. (Also *Longform.org* has a great podcast where nonfiction writers talk about their process and their projects—#puregold.)

I also look for examples in regional magazines that feature narrative nonfiction. Because I live in the South, I find and use great examples in *Garden & Gun*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *Oxford American*, or *Texas Monthly*.

If your school doesn't have one already, I suggest a subscription to print or digital editions of some of Scholastic's magazines. In every issue of *The New York Times Upfront* and *Science World*, there are at least two pieces of narrative nonfiction. *Junior Scholastic*, for grades 6–8, the *Holocaust Reader*, *Scholastic Art*, and *Scholastic Action* are also great resources for finding narrative nonfiction examples.

The online versions of both *Creative Nonfiction* and *Brevity* sometimes offer great samplings of shorter narrative nonfiction works, but they tend to be heavy with personal narratives and memoir. Lee Gutkind (2005) has also published an anthology called *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction*, which I have

in my classroom library for students looking for models. I also use Judith Kitchen's (2005) *Short Takes: Brief Encounters with Contemporary Nonfiction* as well as *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*, edited by Lex Williford and Michael Martone (2007), which features classic nonfiction pieces from the 1970s to the present, including writers such as Jamaica Kincaid, Naomi Shihab Nye, David Sedaris, and Richard Selzer.

My three go-to resources I use for developing prompts, techniques, and minilessons are Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola's (2012) *Tell It Slant: Creating, Refining and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*, Philip Lopate's (2013) *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*, and Lee Gutkind's (2012) *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between*.

## **NARRATIVE SKILL AT WORK: AN EXPERT MENTOR TEXT**

To help students understand narrative nonfiction, we begin by reading mentor texts that challenge what they think they know about nonfiction, texts such as Becca Cudmore's (2016) "The Case for Leaving City Rats Alone."

Cudmore is a science writer, currently based in Brooklyn, who writes mostly about anthropology and ecology. "The Case for Leaving City Rats Alone" was first published in *Nautilus*, then selected for *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2017*. I discovered it one day while browsing in my local bookstore. The opening sentence so trapped me, like one of the rats in her essay, that I stood in the aisle until I finished the piece.

The essay clocks in at around 2,000 words. It is a narrative, informational argument. Or an informative, argumentative narrative. Or an argument with informative and narrative flourishes.

Whatever.

It engaged me. It promised purpose plus a story plus information, a case to examine. Is it a classic argument? No. Is it a straight science piece? No. Is it pure narrative? Not by a long shot. It's a blend of all three to accomplish Cudmore's goal in making her case. And the benefactors of all that nuanced mingling were my attention, my time, and, subsequently, my money. I bought the book.

Let's begin the same way, by reading "The Case for Leaving City Rats Alone" and looking at how Cudmore smartly balances her purpose with the narrative devices designed to engage her reader.



Kaylee Byers crouches in a patch of urban blackberries early one morning this June, to check a live trap in one of Vancouver's poorest areas, the V6A postal code. Her first catch of the day is near a large blue dumpster on "Block 5," in front of a 20-some-unit apartment complex above a thrift shop. Across the alley, a building is going up; between the two is an overgrown, paper- and wrapper-strewn lot. In the lot, there are rats.

"Once we caught two in a single trap," she says, peering inside the cage. She finds a new rat there, and makes a note of it on her clipboard; she'll be back for it, to take the animal to her nearby van, which is parked near (according to Google Maps) an "unfussy" traditional Ethiopian restaurant. Once inside the van, the rat will be put under

<< In this opening paragraph, Cudmore uses the kind of world building that novelists use to situate a reader in a fictional moment. Choosing images that resonate both emotionally and intellectually, Cudmore reveals the Dickensian spectacle. Even though she tells us Block 5 of postal code V6A is poor, she doesn't need to. Notice the twenty-one concrete nouns and seventeen visual adjectives that paint this scene? We've already seen (and felt and smelled) V6A for ourselves.

Cudmore positions us in time ("early one morning this June") and place, a specific world that includes urban blackberries, a large blue dumpster, an apartment complex above a thrift shop, an alley, a vacant lot. And, of course, rats.

She opens with Kaylee Byers, a character in action, not passively quoted or cited, but crouching and trapping. This too is a favorite technique of fiction: start with your character doing something, and your reader will keep reading to find out what she's up to.

<< Notice that Cudmore uses present tense, which does a couple of things narratively: it places Cudmore herself in the thick of the action, and it provides an immediacy and intimacy for the reader. We're peeking over Byers' shoulder as she checks the traps, and we're listening to Cudmore's reporting.

Cudmore shares a quote from Byers about trapping two rats in one cage. Quoted experts are often used in argumentative and informative writing to provide evidence, but this dialogue doesn't do that. Byers' snippet tells

anesthesia, and will then be photographed, brushed for fleas, tested for disease, fixed with an ear tag, and released back into V6A within 45 minutes.

Byers is a PhD student under veterinary pathologist Chelsea Himsworth, a University of British Columbia School of Population and Public Health assistant professor who has become a local science celebrity thanks to her “Vancouver Rat Project.” Himsworth started the project as a way to address health concerns over the city’s exploding rat population—exploding anecdotally, that is, as no one has counted it.

Prior to Himsworth’s work, in fact, the sum total knowledge of Canada’s wild rats could be boiled down to a

us: I’m a regular person, not a science bot, but someone who still finds it remarkable that two rats could find their way into a single cage. It’s pure characterization and context.

Then Cudmore deftly jumps forward in time, another narrative trick. Byers will anesthetize, photograph, brush, test, and tag the rat in a white van. Cudmore chooses to add this interesting detail about the van, “which is parked near (according to Google Maps) an ‘unfussy’ traditional Ethiopian restaurant.”

Why does she include this tidbit? The Google Maps reference is a cultural pin drop as we view-find this spot ourselves and shows us the proximity of an eating establishment. That *unfussy* would sell us on a Tuesday night when we wanted a chill spot for a quick meal. By referencing Google Maps and a restaurant review, she’s made a connection with the reader who, she’s betting, has recently checked out a restaurant and sought directions via Google Maps. V6A is not so distant and remote a land as you, gentle reader, might imagine.

← In these three paragraphs, Cudmore steps out of narrative time and place to give us backstory and positions us in the argument of her essay. We meet Chelsea Himsworth who heads up the Vancouver Rat Project. We learn a bit more about Byers (she’s a PhD student), we learn about a previous rat study in 1984 Richmond and about Himsworth’s early efforts. And most importantly for the argument, Cudmore discloses the situation that will direct the rest of the essay: Vancouver has a rat problem. She follows up the problem with the claim her title alludes to: we should leave rats alone instead of treating them like “invaders” that need to be exterminated.

Notice that even though Cudmore has moved out of scene into exposition, she’s still using the kind of language that fiction writers love: specific, concrete nouns (rats, minivan, syringes, needles, gloves, DNA, bacteria, sidewalks,

single study of 43 rats living in a landfill in nearby Richmond in 1984. So, six years ago, she stocked an old mini van with syringes, needles, and gloves and live-trapped more than 700 of V6A's rats to sample their DNA and learn about the bacteria they carried.

Her research has made her reconsider the age-old labeling of rats as invaders that need to be completely fought back. They may, instead, be just as much a part of our city as sidewalks and lampposts. We would all be better off if, under most circumstances, we simply left them alone.

Rats thrive as a result of people. The great modern disruptions caused by urban development and human movement across the world have ferried them to new ecological niches. "Rats are real disturbance specialists," says biologist Ken Aplin, who has studied the rodents and their diseases for decades. "Very few wild animals have adapted so well to the human environment without active domestication." Rats invade when ecosystems get disrupted. In terms of the bare necessities, "rats need only a place to build a burrow (usually open soil but sometimes within buildings or piles of material), access to fresh drinking water, and around 50 grams of moderately calorie-rich food each day,"

lampposts) and visual verbs (started, boiled down, stocked, live-trapped, reconsider).

<< Did you happen to notice the space between the paragraph that ends "simply left them alone" and the paragraph that begins "Rats thrive"? That gap, achieved by white space and sometimes asterisks, is called a lacuna, and it's a trick writers use to indicate a passage of time or a change in scene, point of view, or perspective. Cudmore uses the lacuna to break from the scene and launch her argument proper, but she doesn't stove up the prose with abstractions, formal language, or nominalizations. She introduces expert testimony from biologist Ken Aplin, mixes in research about the rats, while maintaining the kind of vigorous prose both nonfiction and fiction writers use to keep the reader on the page.

Cudmore introduces the rat as a character with priorities and agendas. Rats are "disturbance specialists." They have been "ferried." They adapt, invade, burrow, and "access resources." Are we talking about rats here or successful CEOs? Cudmore wants us to admire their wily ways in human terms, so she can set up the next paragraph, which debunks the idea that rats are parasites.

according to Matthew Combs, a doctoral student at Fordham University who is studying the genetic history of rats in New York City. In a human-dominated landscape like New York or Vancouver, “It comes down to where rats have found a way to access resources, which often depends on how humans maintain their own environment.”

It’s not hard to understand why humans often think of the rat lifestyle as a parasitic response to our own. But that’s not entirely true. “I have to stop myself sometimes because I want to say that rats have adapted to our cities,” says Combs. The reality is that rats were perfectly positioned to take advantage of the disruptions caused by human settlement long before we arrived. They’ve been on Earth for millions of years, arriving long before modern humans evolved, about 200,000 years ago. Before cities were even a glimmer in our eye, rats were learning to become the ultimate opportunists. “They were likely stealing some other species’ food before ours,” Combs says. Even in the still-remote mountain habitats of New Guinea, says Aplin, “you tend to find rats living in landslides or along creek systems where natural disturbance is going on.” Walk into a lush, primary, intact

<< Cudmore gives us more backstory and props up our antihero, the rat. Christopher Vogler (2007) in *The Writer’s Journey* defines *antihero* as not the opposite of the hero, but “a specialized kind of hero, who may be an outlaw or a villain from the point of view of society, but with whom the audience is basically in sympathy” (34). This is Cudmore’s critical aim—to make the reader sympathize and understand the plight of the rat, just trying to get a drink and some food before he goes home to the wife and kids.

Listen to the word choice she uses to describe our antihero. Rats are “perfectly positioned to take advantage” of modern humans. They are “the ultimate opportunists” of human destruction. Rats continue to “thrive,” “manage,” “create,” and “live.” Again, she might be describing business executives here. Cudmore chooses words that ping on the positive end of the connotation continuum. She clearly understands how the nuanced word choice characterizes the rats and provides emotional depth for her argument.

Cudmore spins a story within a story within an argument. The first story is Byers’, standing in vacant lots, trapping rats, and tagging them in her van. Within those present tense moments of trapping and tagging, Cudmore delivers another story of rats and their lives and our misguided attempts to exterminate them. And both stories contextualize the argument Cudmore is making.

forest, “and they’re pretty rare.” It’s not that rats have become parasitic to human cities; it’s more correct to say they have become parasitic to the disturbance, waste, construction, and destruction that we humans have long produced.

Which brings into question the constant human quest to disrupt rats and their habitats. As much as rats thrive in disrupted environments, Byers says, they’ve managed to create very stable colonies within them. Rats live in tight-knit family groups that are confined to single city blocks, and which rarely interact. The Rat Project hypothesized that when a rat is ousted from its family by pest control, its family might flee its single-block territory, spreading diseases that are usually effectively quarantined to that family. In other words, the current pest control approach of killing one rat per concerned homeowner call could be backfiring, and spreading disease rather than preventing it.

The diseases that rats might be spreading aren’t just their own. Himsworth likes to say that Vancouver’s rats are like sponges. Their garbage-based diets allow them to absorb a diverse collection of bacteria that live throughout their city,

Which is, rats live in “tight-knit family groups” and “stable colonies” and in “single city blocks” when left alone. When attempts are made to eradicate them, they flee these lovely familial arrangements and spread diseases. The descriptive stories of Byer’s research and rat life work powerfully in service of Cudmore’s argument against extermination.

<< Notice Cudmore’s metaphorical chops here. Rats are “sponges” and “mixing bowls.” These are symbols of the kitchen, the center of domesticated life. Coincidence? Metaphors make a comparison of two things, and the most effective are quickly grasped by the reader, both visually and cognitively. But the super-duper ones, like what Cudmore wields here, strike a thematic

in human waste and in our homes. “So it’s not like the presence of harmful bacteria are characteristic of the rats themselves,” she says. They get that bacteria from their environment, and when they move, they take these place-specific pathogens with them.

When “stranger” rats come into contact, Byers says, territorial battles ensue. “They urinate out of fear and they draw blood,” she says—perfect for expelling and acquiring even more bacteria. It’s during these territorial brawls, Byers and her colleagues believe, that bacteria can converge, mix, and create new diseases. “The rat gut acts as a mixing bowl,” says Himsworth, where bacteria that would otherwise never interact can swap genes and form new types of pathogens.

One example is a strain of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA, that Himsworth found in V6A’s rats. It included a piece of genetic material from a very closely-related superbug called methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus pseudintermedius*, or MRSP, which is often only associated with domestic animals like pet dogs. It seems that rats pick up human MRSA from the sewers or the streets, and canine MRSP from our yards, then mix them in their guts. These new human-rat

chord. Once sponges and mixing bowls are in the same sentence with rats, we’re thinking about rats in our kitchen and, of course, contamination. And when we are thinking about contamination, it’s not hard to leap to diseases and death. Which is where Cudmore wants us to go.

At this choice point, Cudmore singles out a MRSA strain Himsworth found in her rats that could potentially spread a new superbug back to humans when rats “swap genes” during territorial brawls.

If you’re anything like me, you’ve been thinking about the Black Death for about five paragraphs now. I’m sure Cudmore is banking on that. She’s said nothing up to this point, but she probably suspects her audience remembers the theory that rats and their fleas spread the bubonic scourge of the Elizabethan age. Cudmore seems to trade on this awareness to create a real tension, the kind of subtextual force that keeps a reader turning the page of a mystery thriller.

bugs could then potentially spread back to people via the rat's droppings and saliva.

In V6A, it's hard not to notice the litter around us. Garbage has bubbled out from under the lids of trashcans and a pile of empty syringes surrounds a parking lot trap. Walking across this landscape of debris, cracked concrete, and weeds, Byers stops at another trap, which is set on what she has named "Block J." She and two student assistants are heading the project's second phase, which involves tracking the real-time movement of rats, using ear tags. Once these trees are mapped, she will begin to euthanize individual rats, and see how their family responds. Part of her PhD work is to understand how human-caused disruptions, pest control in particular, affect how rats move throughout V6A. The hypothesis is that the disruption will send communities scurrying for new ground. With nearly 100 cages to check today, Byers moves hastily to a trap on Block 8. No rat here, but this one did catch a skunk.

A significant finding from the project's original phase, Byers tells me, is that not every rat in V6A carried the same disease. Rat families are generally confined to a single city block,

<< Another lacuna before this paragraph shifts us dramatically back into scene. Back in the V6A postal code and back in present tense. Even though we've been aware of Cudmore's presence close to the action, we see her now in personal pronoun: "it's hard not to notice the litter around us." She again puts the reader in the physical setting of this world—bubbling garbage, trash can lids, empty syringes, debris, concrete, weeds—and we follow Byers as she and two assistants check the traps.

Cudmore also unveils how Himsworth's hypothesis will be tested. In this second phase of the experiment, Byers will kill off individual rats and record how its family reacts. Cudmore hits her thesis again: the disruption of extermination will disperse the rats, sending new pathogens into greater areas.

<< In this paragraph, Cudmore uses indirect dialogue, reporting something Byers says instead of having Byers say it. Fiction writers use indirect dialogue to sum up something that would take too long in dialogue to express. Perhaps Byer's explanation was long and drawn out, overtaxed

and while one block might be wholly infected with a given bacteria, adjacent blocks were often completely disease free. “Disease risk doesn’t really relate to the number of rats you’re exposed to as much as it does which family you interact with,” says Robbin Lindsay, a researcher at Canada’s National Microbiology Lab who assisted the Vancouver Rat Project screen for disease. If those family units are scattered, diseases could potentially spread and multiply—something Byers is hoping to figure out through her PhD work.

If that’s true, a city’s rat policy should include doing the unthinkable: Intentionally leave them where they are. “It might be better to maintain local rat populations that already have some sort of equilibrium with the people who live there,” says Alpin. Many of the diseases that we share with rats are already part of a human disease cycle established over centuries, he says. Seen this way, rats are irrepressible—“a force of nature, a fact of our lives.” Rather than focusing on killing them, we need to try to keep their populations stable and in place—and that includes managing rat immigrants.

with scientific jargon. This summary reporting by Cudmore keeps Byers as a character and an expert without having to deliver the actual dialogue. Again, Cudmore neatly hammers her central claim—that leaving rat families undisturbed would curb the spread of disease.

<< In fiction, when narrators or characters wander forward or backward in time or in or out of place, readers intuitively bookmark where they are narratively because the writer has established them in that moment. They know where the writer has left them and have no trouble holding (1) when and where the action left off, and (2) when and where the narrator or character are roaming out of time simultaneously.

The vantage point is still positioned in the V6A with litter all around us, even as we weigh the evidence of management versus extermination. That Cudmore is talking outside of narrative time in exposition is not confusing because we’ve been narratively bound by scene. We are still with her, even as she further develops the rat as an “irrepressible” character.

An established rat society in a neighborhood makes it a much less viable destination for other rats, for example, those entering through ports. Exotic rats can be more of a threat than those adapted to the region because each rat community evolves with its own suite of unique pathogens, which it shares with the other vertebrates in its ecosystem. New rats mean new diseases. The big question now, Aplin says, “What happens when these different pathogens come together? This is something that I’m just starting to think about now,” he says. “If the local rat population is suppressed, if you’re actively getting rid of it, then you’re also actively opening up niches for these foreign rats to enter.”

In Vancouver, this is a fact of life. “One important thing we do have right over there,” says Byers, motioning with her left hand, “is Canada’s largest shipping port.” Vancouver sits on Vancouver Harbor, which houses the great Port of Vancouver. In one of Himsworth’s earlier studies, she found mites on the ears of rats that live by the port and compared them to rats that take up residence around V6A. Port rats had malformed ears full of a strange breed of mite previously unknown to Canada—“an exotic species that’s found

<< In this paragraph, Cudmore still doesn’t return to the scene, but develops her argument instead: stable rats have stable diseases. Notice Cudmore’s job isn’t to recite facts, but to tell a compelling story. Part of this story involves the balancing of history, claims, research, scientific studies plus using scene, characters, tension, and point of view. In a syntactically sharp sentence, “New rats mean new diseases,” she blends in the expert information from Aplin, who delivers a rhetorical question at the crux of Himsworth’s research: what happens when rats mingle their pathogens?

<< Now we’re back in the dominant scene. In the reader’s mind, we’ve never left. Byers has reemerged. We’re standing in the litter again, and this time, we’re listening to her, watching as she motions with her hand, taking in the sinister implication of the port’s proximity and the specter of foreign rats.

in Asia,” Himsworth says, which happens to be where Vancouver gets the majority of its imports. These foreign ear mites were not found on rats from any other block.

“So I think Aplin’s theory has a lot of merit,” Himsworth says. “It seems that the established rat population at the port acts as a buffer.” Himsworth wonders if this is precisely what has kept an otherwise highly contagious mite from spreading throughout V6A.

Disruption, of course, doesn’t come from just ports and pest control. It is part and parcel of modern civilization. Vancouver’s population is growing steadily (by about 30,000 residents each year), bringing housing development, demolition, and more garbage. Even our love of birds can be a problem. Two years ago, for example, rats invaded a playground and community garden in East Vancouver, a bit outside of V6A. Several media sites reported on the visitors, which were evidently drawn in by birdseed dropped by a single individual. The area soon became known as “Rat Park.” The City of Vancouver urged the garden’s coordinator to put up signage asking people to avoid feeding the birds and to pick up their overripe vegetables. An exterminator was hired, as well—adding more disruption still.

<< Cudmore swings her narrative camera out for the long shot here, looking at the whole of Vancouver’s population, with its roiling swells of demolition and development, then zooming back down to a specific park where rats (described as “visitors”) “invaded.” This expository excursion moves from large summary sentences into smaller, specific, visual moments, such as “bird seed dropped by a single individual.” This is another example of Cudmore’s “story within a story” trend, providing the reader with a specific descriptive example of human disruption she cited in the topic sentence. Humans dropped the birdseed that drew the rats, then exterminators scattered the population.

Himsworth hopes the new science will sway Vancouver's existing policy on rats, which, she stresses, is currently "essentially nonexistent." This bothers her a lot. "I know that Vancouver Coastal Health essentially has the standpoint that, 'Well, we don't see the disease in people so we don't worry about it,'" she says of the region's publicly funded healthcare authority. Homeowners with rat infestations can ring 311, Canada's "411," to report an infestation, but that's not a preventative response. "Rats are pests, and we don't spend healthcare dollars to track pests," said media officer Anna Marie D'Angelo of Vancouver Coastal Health. It was a message echoed by Issues Management Communications Coordinator Jag Sandhu of the City of Vancouver: "The City of Vancouver does not track the rat population." To Himsworth, this is shortsighted. "They're not taking the rat disease risk seriously because they haven't seen it in humans yet—but that's not where diseases start." She also believes the issue is, in part, one of social justice. Rats typically affect poor areas, like V6A, that have little political clout.

<< Here's where Cudmore delivers the counterclaim to her argument with two swiftly delivered portraits in dialogue: Himsworth explains the position of Vancouver's Coastal Health, then we hear from media officer Anna Marie D'Angelo and Jag Sandhu with the City of Vancouver. They stand against the research. They say: we will continue to deal with rat infestation as we have in the past because we don't see any cause to change. Narratively, Cudmore is trading on the old trope where the scientist frantically warns the politicians of the coming apocalypse, and the tone-deaf politicians respond with: "We do not track the rat population." This will be replayed on the six-o'clock news when the pandemic hits.

Back inside one of Byers' traps in V6A, needle-like nails are lightly scraping on the metal. "It's a black rat," Byers tells me—the famed carrier of the Black Death. Byers says she isn't concerned about bubonic plague, which, in North America, is mainly carried by prairie dogs. But there were 13 rat-driven bubonic plague outbreaks in seven countries between 2009 and 2013. And there are plenty of new diseases cooking.

<< Here, at the end of the essay, Cudmore reveals the real fear that underscores this entire essay—a deadly pandemic of rat-borne superbug diseases. The classic fictional technique of withholding and revealing serves to build suspense until this paragraph, where she delivers the blow we've been dreading. By withholding any mention of Black Death, which has, as I pointed out earlier, been creeping around in our heads since the beginning of the essay, she creates suspense.

Listen, she says, to the "needle-like nails." All around her feet are empty syringes, needles euthanize the rats in the van, and needles will administer the medicine to fight the new superbugs, so Cudmore chooses "needles" to describe rat talons. (Did she deliberately choose this simile or was it an artful accident? Who knows, but it's there, and it works and it's wonderful.)

Cudmore uses direct dialogue ("It's a black rat," Byers tells me) for effect also, but then uses indirect dialogue to report that Byers isn't concerned. But, of course, we should be. And we are. In her final moments of exposition, Cudmore alludes to the tension-bearing clincher: rat-driven bubonic plague is not dead. And new diseases are "cooking." We are back in the kitchen, once again, with this visual metaphor, back to the unfussy Ethiopian restaurant, back to mixing bowls and sponges, back to the center of where we live, in our safe delusion of a plague-free life.

# NARRATIVE TOOLS AT WORK IN STUDENT WRITING

Cudmore executes some very sophisticated moves here. And they aren't moves in isolation; the narrative contributes to her purpose, supports her claim, and delivers the information we need to make sense of this rat problem. As you can see, the different expository elements of this essay are not sectioned out in clunky points, but blended seamlessly.

Here, for example, are fifteen narrative techniques Cudmore uses to great effect in her argument. She:

- describes the physical surroundings in rich, sensory language
- initiates world building to ground the reader in time and place
- starts with a character in action
- uses direct and indirect dialogue for characterization and as evidence to support her claim
- uses lacunas to move around in time as well as move between narrative, information, and argument
- uses concrete, specific nouns and active verbs for visual and kinesthetic effect
- uses sentence variety to create rhythm and movement in the prose
- creates narrative tension through withholding and revealing information
- uses flashbacks and flash-forwards, time techniques normally found in fiction
- uses dynamic word choices with rich connotative power to characterize subjects
- uses anecdotes or smaller stories within the larger story to provide evidence to support her claim
- uses figurative language, such as extended metaphors and similes, to create verisimilitude and to explain facts
- establishes a clear point of view, which serves as a narrative and expository filter
- uses rhetorical questions to move the reader forward
- uses backstory to both characterize the subject and provide history and research.

It's important to remember that students don't need layer upon layer of digression, subplots, and fancy-smancy braided narratives like Cudmore expertly uses; they only need to understand how one or two narrative spices work to season an otherwise dry

and tasteless essay. Students who consume a steady diet of essays like this begin to get a feel for the balance between narrative and exposition. The goal of all this work is for students to write blended text with all expository modes at their disposal.

Taylor had written a speech for her AP English language class about the need to make CPR training required for high school health and PE classes, and she decided to turn the speech into a narrative nonfiction piece to submit as a writing sample with her college application. She had researched the information and was working on outlining her argument, but she didn't have anything narrative to really tie it together and give it the engagement she wanted.

The next Monday, however, Taylor came bounding into my room. She was practically jumping up and down.

"You'll never believe what happened to me," she said.

"You won the lottery?" I said.

"A guy had a heart attack at our gym! Now I have narrative for my CPR essay!"

We high fived. Then I inquired about his health. He lived. And he survived because someone administered CPR.

This is a rare instance where the universe dropped a narrative gift into a writer's lap. Taylor chose to open her essay with this compelling moment to introduce us to the necessity of her argumentative claim. Here's a portion of her draft and some notes about the techniques she uses along the way.

I looked over at my boyfriend, Nathan, who sat next to me stretching. I took my headphones out, "Hey can we start abs now?"

"Yeah, hang on."

I scanned the gym looking at all the different types of people working out. The macho weightlifters who do nothing but lift weights. The cardio lovers who just run all the time and drink detox water. The folks who started coming

>> In this opening section, Taylor uses several of the strategies our class had listed on our menu of narrative techniques. She grounds us in time and place. She and her boyfriend Nathan are introduced as characters as well as several others (bodybuilders, cardio junkies, New Year's resolution makers) and the

to the gym as their New Year's resolution but will probably stop after this month. I continued scanning until I saw out of the corner of my eye a man collapse to the ground with a thud. His maroon dri-fit shirt was soaked through with sweat, and his thick curly hair was greying.

I looked around and for a second or two, no one noticed. I froze. I thought about trying to get the attention of one of the workers, but before I acted quick enough two women jumped down from the treadmill next to him and were already surrounding the man on the ground. He was turned on his side facing away from me. He seemed young, like a middle aged man.

"Sir? Sir, can you hear us?" A man who was lifting weights tapped him and shook him to try and wake him. A Y worker rushed over and immediately called 911.

"Should we turn him over on his back?" One of the women from the treadmills asked.

"No, this is the rescue position," the man from earlier said, kneeling down.

"Hey, he's not breathing!"

I stood only about 6 feet from a man who one minute was working out like every other person in the gym this morning, and the next was fighting for his life. They turned him on his back, and I saw a glimpse of his swollen, purple face between the people surrounding him.

victim. She uses dialogue and sensory description. She also uses a lacuna to separate the narrative portion of her essay with the information.

According to the American Heart Association, 90 percent of people who suffer out of hospital cardiac arrests will die waiting for the ambulance to arrive. If someone you know, or a loved one, goes into cardiac arrest, and you're unsure of how to begin CPR, the first thing you will probably do is call 911. After talking to a dispatcher for around 2 minutes, they will send first responders and paramedics. That's two minutes the person has gone without oxygen.

On average the EMTs arrive at the scene 8 minutes after the call. After approximately 9 minutes without oxygen, the brain has begun to develop Cerebral Hypoxia, which is lack of oxygen to the brain. By this time, your loved one has gone without oxygen for 10 minutes. This can cause severe brain damage or even leave the person brain dead.

"We need to do CPR!" One of the Y workers started to do compressions while the woman sitting by his side held his hand and told him everything was going to be okay, if he could even hear her. I looked around at the rest of the people in the gym to see their reactions. Nathan sat next to me, his mouth in a fine line, his eyes wide.

Some stood and watched from a distance, others kept working out as if nothing had happened. As if this man's life wasn't in danger. My attention turned back to the people who had stopped doing compressions, and began hooking him up to a defibrillator.

<< In this section, Taylor weaves in facts she'd researched from the American Heart Association plus she executes a pretty sophisticated narrative move that we had identified in several other mentor texts: she embeds a ticking clock. We know the victim is on the gym floor suffering a heart attack. The EMTs have been called, but how soon will they get there? As time passes—two, four, six, eight minutes—we know his chances of survival become slimmer. This narrative technique heightens the tension of the piece.

<< Again, Taylor moves us back into narrative with the continuation of the opening scene. Not only does she give us a description of the scene, but she makes a small detour into the seemingly nonchalance of the rest of the gym. She writes, "As if this man's life wasn't in danger." She again uses realistic dialogue that puts us right into the moment, and she describes in clear, physical action the electric shock coursing through the man's body. His mouth is

“Stand back, hands off.”

The machine whirred up, and everyone stepped back. The machine sent a shock through him, and his chest raised up and fell back down, violently thrown by the electrical shock. I stood up to try to see better, as they continued CPR. His mouth was now open and foam began spilling out down his chin.

open and “foam” comes out. I love her choice of words here. I can see this so clearly. It’s not a medical term or a bit of figurative language, but a clear descriptor of what she saw that is now firmly registered in the mind of the reader.

For the remainder of the text, Taylor goes back and forth from narrative to information, providing statistics, information, and research to support her argument. She doesn’t reveal the status of the heart attack victim until the final paragraph, but he survived, “thanks to those who helped save his life by doing CPR.” All of the elements of fiction—character, tension, description, dramatic stakes—serve the purpose of her argument.

---

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The premise of *Story Matters* is that if we teach students how expert nonfiction writers use narrative techniques to engage readers, our students can use these same techniques to make their own writing better. The narrative techniques I offer in this book are not built on mastery, so feel free to move around in the book and explore different moves that make sense for your students. Try out different techniques in isolation or with a variety of combinations—not all of the techniques need to be used in every essay, of course. The writer determines what the essay needs, and what tools of engagement will best deliver the purpose.

The bottom line is that reading and writing nonfiction need not be so dry and dreadful. Stories are the cornerstone of all human communication, and for a student who sets out to write a compelling argument or an interesting informational piece, that foundation can be narrative. A writer's voice can be engaging with word choices that reveal a real personality behind the page. They can feature world building and characters, fully developed, that both engross the reader and support his argument. And they can tell a story, an enchanting or ironic one, a dark or buoyant one, that will make us think and feel and act.

Sample pages