Featured Essay

The Art of Storytelling
A Pedagogy for Proposal Writing

Josephine Walwema

Abstract

This article is based on the idea that there is latent storytelling already in proposals. It explores the various ways in which storytelling functions as a pedagogical model of teaching the writing of proposals in business and technical writing courses. The central premise is that stories, like proposals, are forms of discourse that place events sequentially from beginning to end with meaningful and graspable connections in between. Stories take (identified) audiences into account by being selective of events that are carefully rearranged and described through composites of scenarios and characters. This article explores those storytelling patterns in theory and in practice. It aims to enhance the perspective of teaching proposal writing by calling attention to a seemingly inconsequential or unrelated notion – storytelling.

KEYWORDS: PEDAGOGY, PROPOSAL WRITING, STORYTELLING, TECHNICAL WRITING.

Affiliation

Oakland University
email: walwema@oakland.edu

Introduction

Proposal writing is an important component in the business and technical writing class. Because business and technical writing deal with anticipating and managing change (Johnson-Sheehan, 2008), proposals serve the important function of instituting control over what would otherwise be uncertain. Through proposals, writers can shed light on past actions and present needs, and also project necessary future changes in orderly and manageable ways.

Proposals are, however, complex and challenging to write. They require, as Porter and Rossini (1985: 33) suggested, "multiple skills." This article describes an approach to the pedagogy of proposals in business and technical communication based on the concept of storytelling and centered on the notion of the narrative as a key factor in crafting a proposal.

The argument is laid out in a series of steps, starting from an analysis of the proposal genre based on existing scholarship. Second, the concept of storytelling is reviewed, and it is shown how it is predisposed to proposal writing. Third, an explanation is given of how my pedagogy has benefited from the storytelling approach. The argument concludes with some discussion of that approach in practice. The theoretical framework is guided by scholarship on the proposal genre and on the theory of storytelling. It is augmented by insights gained from the author's classroom-based practices.

The Proposal Genre

Available scholarship on proposals is almost exclusively focused on grant proposals, with most of it keen to highlight the scientific nature of the grant proposal (Connor, 2000; Lepori and Rocci, 2009). This may be because, as Myers (1990: 41) has asserted, grant proposals are the most basic form of scientific writing. Grant proposals are the key to unlocking funds that make possible scientific studies and publications. Consequently, much like the scientific paper, scholars have embarked on a course to unlock the code that makes for winning grant proposals. This is no wonder, given the sizeable role the grant proposal plays in the scientific community.

So far, a foolproof formula for proposals has eluded scholars. Their complicated nature and the textual features from which they are constituted and interpreted make for a challenging writing process. The scholarship on proposals has followed one of two strands: the genre strand, through which grant proposals are examined in their stylistic and argumentative features (Connor and Mauranen 1999; Tardy 2003), and the ethnographic approach (Myers, 1990; Swales, 1990), through which scholars observe grant writers in their specialized roles within the scientific domain. Myers (1990)

examined biologists; Connor and Wagner (1999) examined non-profits; and Van Nostrand (1994) documented grant writers in military research with the U.S. government. In both strands, the scholarship has suggested similarities between grant proposals and promotional, fundraising material in terms of the rhetorical (persuasive) moves which writers make (Connor and Mauranen, 1999: 45; Myers 1990: 42).

The other aspects of the proposal are the linguistic and rhetorical characteristics and the inherent structural constraints (Connor, 2000; Connor and Mauranen, 1999; Halleck and Connor, 2005). For example, Connor and Mauranen (1999: 481) found that the recurrent patterns of structure in proposals "affect comprehension and determine effectiveness." These highly structured contexts are some of the built-in elements that make possible the persuasiveness of the proposal. They are therefore not optional or negotiable elements.

In addition to genre limitations, the different categories of proposals also impose severe disciplinary constraints on writers. As Berkenkotter (2001: 257) suggested, genre is a "powerful tool for instantiating disciplinary practices over time and across professions." Nowhere, perhaps, is the gatekeeping function of the genre more enforced than it is in the proposal. Thus, academic research proposals (Porter and Rossini, 1985) differ from conference proposals (Halleck and Connor, 2005) and grant proposals (Connor, 2000), which in turn differ from the project proposals which are typical among consulting engineers (Whalen, 1986). These subgenres notwithstanding, the proposal writer is expected to construct a logical hierarchy that provides sufficient detail to constitute each of the proposal facets within the allotted limits.

Proposals are a persuasive form of writing (Johnson-Sheehan, 2008; Halleck and Connor 2005). Their purpose is to persuade readers to accede to the issues they raise. To be persuasive, such issues have to satisfy a four-part model, as Connor and Mauranen (1999) have suggested. The writer, according to Connor and Mauranen (1999: 48), has to "capture the attention of the reader; describe the idea; adjust to the needs of readers; and establish the writer's competence" at one fell swoop. The success of the proposal narrative is manifest through the writer's deft conveyance of "'insider' knowledge" without the appearance of being an insider. In rhetorical parlance, insider knowledge (*ethos*) and the ability to connect with readers (*pathos*) in a logical and incisive manner (*logos*) are key (Edlund, 2012). Further, when it comes to form and content, the two pillars upon which proposals are based, certitude about the intrinsic value of the project matters. However, that certitude is tempered by the inconvenient fact that a grant proposal, as Lepori and Rocci (2009: 174) state, is "evaluated against the credibility of [the] promise [that it will deliver] and on the relevance of its expected results" rather than on actual research.

Moreover, proposals contain multiple facets, among which are: purpose and problem statement, project description, background (a critical evaluation of existing knowledge in the field), significance, project scope, project design and methods – and, in some cases, the researcher's qualifications, the budget, and a timeline for the project completion. These facets can be so disparate that a scholar skilled at designing a project or at crafting budgets may not be adept at generating the narrative of the proposal. Underpinning all of these elements is the audience, for proposals are in essence persuasive documents intended for targeted audiences (Halleck and Connor, 2005). Not only that, these audiences often have varying demands, ranging as they do from academic committees, scientists (who know the content), policymakers (who may not know the content), and funding agencies (Tardy, 2003). This combination can be overwhelming for students, particularly given that a proposal may be just one of their many assignments over the course of the semester.

Notice, however, that the focus of this scholarship is on grant proposals. In as much as proposals share some basic tenets, not all proposals, particularly those written in business and technical communication, fit neatly into the structure of the grant proposal. Consider the following requirements for a Technical Proposal Writer, a position that a graduate from our Technical and Business Writing programs would apply for.

Technical Proposal Writer

JOB DESCRIPTION:
Reporting to the Senior Manager, the position is responsible for managing the process of responding to and completing request for information (RFIs) and request for proposals (RFPs) in conjunction with growing corporate client base.

The ideal candidate will have experience balancing business needs of technical accuracy and persuasive messaging with a goal of producing output that is well-researched and skillfully executed, within a defined time period.

Minimum Professional and Technical Skills:
Ideally has experience in:
- Extensive writing and editing skills with the ability to write for multiple audiences and has demonstrated mastery with both technical and persuasive writing.

Minimum Education, Certification, Training:
Bachelor's in English, communication, professional writing, behavioral psychology, marketing, or equivalent experience required
Source: http://www.dice.com/job/result/buxton/471391

The skills required for this position attest to Porter and Rossini's (1985) depiction of multiple skills, which are technical, persuasive, and discursive within the target discourse community. How can we then formulate genre and career expectations pedagogically?

Teaching Proposal Writing

Typically, proposals are written in response to a Request for Proposals (RFP). However, in classroom contexts, those who teach proposal writing engage in a series of discussions to draw upon students' discourse communities such as the university, their workplaces, and their neighborhoods and other areas of interest to them. If successful, this strategy yields, not just material for proposals, but also an immediate primary audience. Some of the proposals resulting from this pre-proposal planning have:

- suggested changes in procedure, such as for new student orientation;
- proposed new initiatives to integrate commuter students into campus life;
- discussed ways to improve parking on campus;
- identified ways to conserve energy at places of work;
- proposed an employee wellness program;
- suggested ebooks as an alternative to costly print texts.

Many students have trouble with proposals because proposals are in fact speculative. Unlike research studies in which students document the process and report results, in proposals students are writing about a project that is promissory and in which they are attempting to harmonize between their interests as writers and those of the audience.

The challenge for instructors is to get students to work within an orderly proposal development process. For this process to be less onerous, students need to develop a stake in their proposals. This happens once they select real problems that they care to see resolved. As they write, they have to exhibit insider knowledge of the research idea, connect with readers by articulating the need or exigency of what they are proposing, and explain the proposed concept in a logical and incisive manner so as to be persuasive.

For pedagogy, instructors often rely heavily on proposal structure as a heuristic. However, it is exactly this emphasis on formula, this rule-of-thumb approach, that makes proposal writing a monumental task, given writers' need to balance between their insider knowledge and the structural constraints of proposals. I contend that such a gap can be corrected, or even preempted, through a storytelling approach. For the narrative of the

grant is the thread that weaves the disparate facets of the proposal together. What better way to weave this narrative than through storytelling?

Storytelling is already in proposals: as a medium, storytelling has a beginning that sets up a need or expectation, a middle that complicates that need/expectation, and an end that resolves it. Intrinsic to storytelling are the tools of time and place of events, the participants in the action, and, optionally, an assessment of the acts. Storytelling includes audience awareness and has the ability to give structure to narratives. I use *narrative* here to describe the structure immanent in the form and coherence of a set of events. That structure is what helps writers identify the characters in the story and the roles they play; it allows them to set the scene and to indicate cumulative progression. Writers can determine the sequence of events in the story and the perspective from which to tell it. These are all attributes of a proposal. And that pattern, when recognized by an audience, is innately persuasive as I explain below.

In what follows, I will introduce the important premises upon which storytelling rests and will discuss how they are pedagogically instructive to proposal writing. I focus on the notion of *story*, which I argue is organizationally positioned to accomplish two things: (1) delivering evidentiary content that (2) persuades target readers.

Storytelling: A Conceptual Framework

"Story" shares a common etymology with "history" – they both derive from a Greek group of words that include *histos* meaning "web", *histanai* meaning "to stand", and *eidenai* meaning "to know well". Storytelling is an art of weaving, of constructing, the product of intimate knowledge. (Gabriel, 2000: 1)

As the history of the word suggests, stories transmit information from a position of knowing. And by invoking vivid mental images that approximate everyday human experiences, they appeal to people in interesting and enticing ways. However, stories, by nature, offer several layers of comprehension, ranging from surface to textual, situational, thematic, and agency perspectives on meaning (Riessman, 2008). These layers by themselves could become obstacles in that they might obscure meaning and hinder comprehension, given the multiple perspectives they embody. What keeps stories from breaking down into conflicting elements are genre conventions. Genre, as Graesser, Olde, and Klettke (2002: 240) put it, facilitates "synchrony among levels." As Bhatia (2004: ix) has noted, the "interpretive potential of genre" and the meaning those interpretations evoke make it possible to accommodate different strands in stories as a schema. As such, the genre of storytelling allows for a

breadth in perspective that makes possible the construction of the text and the built-in expectations for readers that govern its interpretation (Graesser, Olde, and Klettke, 2002).

Stories have a way of not just shaping texts, but of organizing experiences. This may explain why storytelling, as a way of meaning making, has evolved into a tool through which organizations can disclose knowledge and communicate their intent to the public. Scholars such as Czarniawska (1998), Meister (2011), and Riessman (1993) have informed the practice (of organizational change) by championing the value of narrative forms of knowing. Stories help to provide coherence and are a means of making sense of complex issues. These scholars demonstrate that readers make sense of narratives because stories communicate complex ideas in simple yet memorable ways – unlike, say, handbooks. By making it possible for listeners to retain the fundamentals of an issue, storytelling constitutes an intentional and deliberative accounting of events.

Individuals make sense of actions, events, and objects, or they explain the relationship among them, by attempting to answer the question, why? They look to causally explain actions and behavior in order to make inferences. That questioning coupled with expectation forms the basis of comprehension (Taboada and Guthrie, 2006). It is also a driving force in research. Consider how David Hume's and John Stuart Mill's understanding of causality is held together by what Hume called a "constant conjunction" of events (cited in Morabia, 2013: 1527). With causality comes a deterministic element that examines whether X caused Y and (if so) how. Such a pattern is typical of storytelling as storytellers describe events, imply the causes of those events, and allude to the process in which events unfolded – a prelude to inquiry.

Moreover, stories rely on the active participation of audience members, as do proposals. Audience participation in judging the relevance and validity of actions calls to mind Aristotle's claim that persuasive discourse is "persuasive in relation to someone" (*Rhetoric* 1.2.1356b). The storytelling approach makes it possible to invoke *pathos* by conveying shared beliefs and a sense of common purpose so readers are invested in a resolution. The confluence of emotion and fact addresses the "so what" question that is so necessary for establishing exigency within a proposal.

Unfortunately, the nature of research discourse, which emphasizes the need for (scientific) certainty, has denigrated storytelling and, by extension, the knowledge it generates. Storytelling, from the point of view of its detractors, is incapable of generating true knowledge, which they say is the province of the hard sciences (Miller, 1994). This dismissive notion that one who tells stories deals in flights of fancy (which are outside the realm of reason) is emblematic of this disturbing turn that is dismissive

of storytelling as being, in the words of Miller (1994: 506), "'soft,' 'idiosyn-cratic,' 'undertheorized,' 'individualistic,' even 'narcissistic.'" Granted, tales are what stories are made of and tales are often considered unrealistic (Bettelheim, 2010). Yet, as Delgado (1989: 239) maintains, stories have the ability to "shatter complacency and challenge the status quo." Separately, Benjamin (1968), Feyerabend (1975), and Delgado (1989) manage to shatter the myth of scientific privilege in inquiry by encouraging us to see that stories allow for an examination of the truths inherent in projected facts and by forcing us to recognize that, in interpreting associated events, a new rendering of information is attained.

In addition, a storyteller, in focusing on a set of particulars that advance a set of themes, is performing an act that is analogous to posing research questions. Those questions allow a researcher to explore the relationship among variables in order to develop a hypothesis. This active form of meaning-making leads to further exploration, so that the process of creating and recreating coherence unfolds organically. Taking the narrative route proves to be more concrete than hypothesizing on suppositions and making abstractions. A narrative stance experientially gives an account of events while simultaneously encouraging a writer to interpret and construct meaning in a discursive mode.

Beyond being a mere chronicle of tales and facts, stories are often valued for their explanatory nature. Anthropologist Levi-Strauss (1969) has pointed to stories' ability to explain and thereby offer a collective under-standing of a cause, bringing together disconnected elements to form a complete picture or a particular outlook. Similarly, Bettelheim (2010) has alluded to the intellectually stimulating nature of stories. Stimulation, coupled with the ensuing suspense and curiosity, makes for an engaged reader who is invested in the progression and resolution of the story. The way a story is comprehended, then, is not so much a highly subjective conception, but an objective kind of insight. That objectivity is achieved by a systematic unification, made possible by story, of underlying structures and processes that conform to specific instantiation in the narrative. These are some of the explicatory capacities of stories and their ability to simul-taneously offer new ways of seeing complexities while posing contested questions for analysis.

Foundational conceptualizations of story differ slightly from the act of narrating history. For example, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes a poet (storyteller) from a historian on the basis of function. Aristotle contends that the historian's role is to give an account of what happened while that of the poet (story teller) is to say "what sorts of things might happen, that is, the things possible according to likelihood or necessity" (*On Rhetoric,* p. 1451; a36–8). Aristotle assigns an analytic role to the storyteller, a means

of generating order out of chaos – which is what proposals do. With the historian gathering and recording facts, the poet establishes causality among events – things happen *because of…*(certain factors).

Story is epistemological in that the storyteller conveys events through sensory detail and constructs a structure upon which the tale is told with fidelity to the facts while relying on the story's "explanatory properties" (Armstrong, 1998: 449). From the audience's perspective, a storyteller does not merely recount facts, but rather invents a narrative (Gabriel, 2000). A storyteller shows a grasp of the fundamentals of her/his subject in ways that are believable by displaying expertise and by projecting a sense of shared understanding with audiences.

Furthermore, cultural anthropologists such as Geertz (1973) and Dundes (1987), whose discipline is heavily steeped in storytelling, see in stories what Gabriel (2000: 15–16) has called "depositories of meaning." As archives of meaning, stories then become a reliable means of sense-making in the progression of a sequence of events (see also Bettelheim, 2010). In the face of modernity and technology, the art and craft of storytelling are eroding; Gabriel (2000: 15) suggests that the evolution of story is towards a "narrative deskilling," which is the inability to construct narratives in their most basic form (with characters, plots, and scenes). As teachers of technical and business writing know, a student's familiarity with the research topic offers an immediate advantage in localized knowledge that can be a springboard for formulating the kinds of questions necessary to tease out the scope and size of the study for the proposal.

Unfortunately, the notion that non-scientific approaches do not result in objective knowledge poses an obstacle to storytelling. Friedland (2012), who has written about this concept in an opinion piece for the *New York Times*, has placed it in the broader formulations of philosophy and science, suggesting that the differences in science and philosophy center on methodology. If storytelling is placed in the category of philosophy, wherein the quest for knowledge is grounded in the "rational tools of logical analysis" (Friedland 2012: para. 14), the more scientifically minded among us would seek a more measured approach that relies on empiricism and evidence-based research. And yet, through articulating and clarifying concepts, philosophers have yielded knowledge drawn from rationally designed conceptual frameworks in fields such as ethics, economics, mathematics, and justice that have withstood the test of time. Such enduring knowledge indicates that there are some things that cannot be settled empirically but can be settled through rational thought.

The dynamics of storytelling simultaneously function as a method to advance the narrative in a proposal and as the means to focus on particular information. We see this framework in the work of scholars like Geertz

(1973). In examining the etymology of the word *fiction*, Geertz noted that its Latin root, *fictio*, refers to the process of making, which, to his mind, is the practice of making knowledge (driven by human agency) in the arts and in the sciences. It is, in essence, science in the making, as Bruno Latour (Latour, 1987) would say. Consider the parallels: storytelling pays attention to particulars of experience (Sullivan, 2000), which is an empirical undertaking insofar as it employs careful scrutiny. Similarly, the selective manner in which storytellers determine what experiences to include is not the purview of the story genre alone. Scientists, through sampling and instrumentation, delineate areas of study so they can ably handle the data and, after analysis, generalize from experimental results to generate theory. The aggregate experiences lead to the building of a theory. In the same way, stories make accessible accounts of individuals and situations, providing opportunities to analyze and interpret their uniqueness.

Stories are characteristically known for having a beginning, a middle, and an end – a dependable form of narrative. They start with a great lead often paired with the introduction and opening sequence, followed by details and rounded off by a resolution. These conventions position the reader to anticipate a complete telling of particulars pertaining to a given story and can be usefully applied to proposals. Storytelling exemplifies the structure of a temporal reality, a necessary component in proposals for satisfying coherence.

Stories are also heavily reliant on description as a means of shoring up the argument. Descriptions augment the argument even as they illustrate or reinforce surrounding facts related to the main theme. To accomplish this feat, student writers can pay attention to the words they choose; they can opt for words that are "thematically telling" (Flaherty, 2009: 36). Flaherty (2009: 37) has suggested "theme-colored metaphors" that add color, number, and shape to deepen the meaning. For example, a student writing about the difficulties that working students face needs to be conscious of the kind of language that reflects the theme of scheduling flexible class times, perhaps through hybrid and online classes. Such metaphors enable the writer to stay with the theme while providing readers with familiar ways of conceptualizing issues pertaining to college. Such themes trigger familiar insights and social concerns that can persuade the reader to direct imaginative resources toward a solution.

The storytelling genre focuses on practical human experiences as its subject matter. Those experiences are often narrated in rich, detailed, and "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) through which all possible meanings are communicated. The rational and logical analysis inherent in stories and the manner in which they communicate a coherent and complete tale induces an especially active and complex form of human behavior. In the process of

narrating, patterns begin to emerge and a structure begins to form. These patterns and structures become the subject of interpretation and analysis, processes that are beneficial to proposals. This is because often proposal writers have the tendency to shift the focus from the human subjects of their ideas to the problems themselves. For example, a proposal in support of a social program like early childhood education might shift its focus from the benefits to children of early exposure to education to the chronic lack of funding and how important it is that there be adequate funding for such programs. Focusing on the children is important for decision makers responsible for allocating resources.

The Proposal Genre through Storytelling

My pedagogy of proposals is based on a rhetorical approach that perceives proposals as persuasive in every particular case. This means that the proposal which a student writes elicits action and brings about the change s/he advocates. It also means that rather than suggesting that they use a formulaic approach to the proposal, I urge my students to take an interpretive approach in which they pay judicious attention to facts (*logos*), which are in and of themselves very persuasive. In addition, the narrative strand in story becomes a particularly useful means of conveying human experiences (*pathos*) and ideas in compelling terms (*ethos*) because it allows readers to understand and to interpret the meaning behind the underlying causes and effects. To the extent that for human beings narrative structure is "an innate schema for the organization and interpretation of facts," as Burns (1999: 159) suggests, it goes without saying that proposal writers would find the storytelling approach beneficial. Storytelling techniques allow for crucial emphasis through a careful selection of facts and their interpretation. The structure that adheres to the pattern of beginning, middle, and end also implicitly communicates meaning assigned to each category; that is, the reader is made aware of latent meanings related to the advent and progression of events through their telling. The act of telling a story then creates and satisfies a set of expectations inherent in stories.

In a proposal genre, time and event as components of past, present, and future can serve as a form of inquiry in that through them, a student writer develops situational awareness of the proposal topic and creates temporal context sufficient to advance the argument. Specifically, time connotes an element of continuity, as Harold Lee opines in "Time and Continuity" (Lee, 1972). Lee (1972: 296) contends that the notion of successive events and the cumulative nature of their occurrence (which are elements of story) together constitute an element of "felt continuity," meaning that there are "no gaps, no separations, no pre-established boundaries." Because

continuity organizes known spatial relations among events in a way that makes sense for readers, storytelling becomes a decoding technique for conveying definite and definitive scenarios with sufficient detail. This element of felt continuity is pedagogically pertinent in that it can advance proposals using a past, present, and future structure that obviates the imitative and formulaic approach that is common in teaching proposals. When students employ this device of storytelling, they supply details of time and event pertaining to the particulars of their proposals.

As previously noted, proposals are, as Johnson-Sheehan (2008: 3) has put it, "tools for managing change." Instructors of technical and business writing are faced with the challenge of helping student writers define and describe the subject of their proposal as the exigency demands. That calls for particulars, specific causalities and their effects, communicating what (Geiger, 2008: 68) has called "narrative knowledge," which is knowledge that is "accepted through its own narrative practice." Readers will be looking to determine if the story as narrated complies with their established view of a complete narrative in terms of internal consistency. That (self-)legitimation (Geiger, 2008) ultimately contributes to making the proposal persuasive.

Another component of proposals is audience. Fisher's (1994) conceptualization of rational logic indicates that it is dependent on, among other things, audience. Audience in proposals comprises people who serve gatekeeping functions. They include grant agency officials and reviewers. As gatekeepers, they may set the terms of the proposal through goals and objectives and therefore make clear what the "deliverable" is. For example, the *Grant Proposal Guide* on the National Science Foundation (2014) website enforces strict conformity with instructions for proposal preparation, even as it specifies a 15-page limit for its proposals. However, in business and technical writing classes, students often write unsolicited proposals that, while they do not have specific directives, nevertheless operate within audience-specific parameters. Perelman (1982: 30) has called this the "universal audience."

Because audiences are inclined to expect certain traits in proposals, balanced against their own understanding, the story being told in the proposal has to resonate with the body of knowledge already evident and presumably held by the expected audiences. That sense of shared understanding adds plausibility and induces persuasion.

Proposals involve making interpretations of complex, often shifting situations, presenting a tacit understanding of the context and dealing with multiple variables using both craft and reason. Insights gathered from the (telling of the) story serve as the basis upon which judgment can be rendered and decisions made. This practical form of reasoning is dependent on particulars needed in proposals and is far removed from the abstract

forms in which some students have approached this task. Emphasizing this aspect of narrative knowledge can help bridge that gap for student writers and empower them to begin to offer more compelling detail in an overtly narrative approach to the writing of proposals.

Proposals can benefit from the artfulness of storytelling, particularly their ability to convey clarity of thought and rational unity. Consider the kinds of problem–solution proposals written in most technical communication classes. They focus on societal issues such as funding for higher education, reading and literacy levels, combating identified ills in society, bridging gaps among communities, and similar topics. In following the storytelling model, writers organically put people first, with the added benefit that human interest stories often carry significant appeal with the readership. Further, I have found that as they start from the personal and move to the broader perspective, students structure their proposals so that the main ideas are embedded in a causal chain of events and actions. This structure guides readers in their comprehension because it provides perspective and context.

Model of the Storytelling Approach in the Classroom

The proposal assignment in my business and technical writing classes is research-based. Because our program is grounded in rhetorical theory, I stress the idea that the proposal is a persuasive document and that the students' task is to convince readers through a variety of rhetorical appeals that the problem (or opportunity) the proposal will address exists, is important, and warrants their action. This process often involves some subtle display of accommodation and negotiation in the text of the proposal itself. It is, however, a crucial step, given that readers need to be convinced that the issue matters, or else the proposal fails.

Further, since a proposal outlines a future action and seeks permission to implement that action, the reader looks out for a realistic and detailed plan of what that action will be. Moreover, the bulk of the proposal is comprised of its details, necessary to dispel concerns about the subject of the proposal. Often, students' attention to detail is what demonstrates knowledge of the subject and projects an ethos of expertise, which is in itself persuasive. These details are what constitute the *narrative* of the proposal, and they are what I focus students' attention on. I contend that if they get the narrative right, the rest of the proposal falls into place.

To tackle these discreet components through the storytelling approach, I take a step-by-step approach, first, by introducing the proposal assignment. Then, to guide their writing process, I give students a detailed (3-page) assignment sheet along with the following instructions:

Write me a memo seeking my approval for the topic for your proposal. The requirements for the proposal are explained in the assignment sheet to which you can refer for details. For this stage in the proposal assignment process, I will function as the gatekeeper; the person who assures that your chosen topic is viable and feasible. Your memo should anticipate the following questions:

- What problem will you address in your proposal? You may describe a real situation or devise a hypothetical one.
- Have you clearly articulated the exigency? I am looking here for a well-articulated problem statement that spells out what is at stake from yours and your audience's point of view.
- If you manage to articulate an existing issue/opportunity, do you address the so-what question, i.e. what would happen if the issue/opportunity is not addressed?
- Who should be concerned about this issue? Who will read / respond to the proposal? Where do you stand relative to your audience? Remember the complexities of audiences.
- Why is this problem significant for this audience? What's at stake for them?
- Do you have a sound solution to the problem; i.e. what would a good solution entail? What about alternative plausible solutions?
- What will it take to research the issue and complete your analyses? What time and resource constraints do you foresee?
- Do you have a work plan for your project, a plan that shows specifically when certain activities must be completed this semester if you are to finish the project on time?
- Your memo should reflect the memo convention, be persuasive and accessible.

After students have proposed and had their topics accepted, it is time to move on to the draft. Because like stories, proposals start in the past, highlight the present, and point to the future, I task the students to "tell the story" of their proposed topic. The aim is to use narrative as an organizing principle for the disparate parts of the proposal. To help students organize their content according to that pattern, I outline the cues below to elicit story, yet center on the proposal structure. These questions, once answered, begin to point toward the narrative which each student's proposal might constitute. Note that I use these guidelines to enact the storytelling approach, unless a student's proposal is in response to a Request for Proposal (RFP), in which case the guidelines in the RFP are paramount. In every indeterminate case, students follow the model below.

Proposal Structure / Storytelling Approach

Introduction: In the proposal structure, the introduction is where you present the problem your proposal is going to focus on. This might include a brief history, purpose statement, and rationale. Using the **storytelling** approach, the writer **sets the scene**: Begin the narrative in the present. Preview the focus of the issue. Move from the general to the specific as you get progressively close to your purpose statement. Remember details such as time (when), place (where), identify the actors (who), and their actions (what), and, if possible, their motives (why). As you paint this scene, anticipate your readers' needs so you don't lose sight of the issue/opportunity that the story raises; focus on why this issue matters and how you can you draw readers in and maintain their interest at this stage.

Background: This section in the proposal is meant for existing knowledge about the issue / opportunity. That knowledge might be previous or related work done and its effect in the aftermath. You can enhance this section using **storytelling** by tracing the issue to its roots using prompts such as: When did this become an issue? What were the triggers? Isolate the causes: focus on what is happening in the story through visual imagery, and tie the effects to those causes. This section can serve to predict what might happen next given those cause and effect elements and can help move readers to see the progression of events and toward a better understanding of the issue raised. So as the introduction has helped establish the situation, the background helps complicate it by pointing to the need for change. Done carefully, this section contextualizes the proposal with essential background information and helps justify the need for the study.

Statement of the Problem / Current Situation: State the problem/opportunity as you see it, making certain that your readers are in agreement. What is the gap you hope to bridge? In **storytelling, explicate the scene:** Focus on the most important aspects in the story to construct a narrative centered on the issues. Evoke existing knowledge, shared beliefs, and assumptions to tease out details. Spell out the implications of this issue/opportunity. Refer to experiential situations in the story that recreate the complexities of the issue / opportunity. Explicitly and systematically spell out the details, events, and incidents that pertain to this issue so as to progressively move the reader toward an interpretive

framework. You may spell out the attempts made to resolve this issue and how they played out. What worked? What was lacking? What was overlooked? What experience do you want to convey to your readers? The chronology of that framework inclines your reader to see the implicit dimensions of the issue as ordered by the facts in your narrative. It also becomes the interpretive lens through which the issue is seen.

Remember this structure is to help you develop a coherent pattern and a flow of ideas in your proposal. Through it, aim to make connections between events and concepts, and ideas.

Significance: This is where the writer establishes significance and exigency by addressing the so-what question. The **story-telling** method will emphasize the **connotations**. It will attempt answers to: What are the implications of this story? What is of consequence? What does it mean that events unfolded this way? How can these events point toward a resolution?

Method: in this section, the proposal calls for plausibility. Articulate a research design, showing that the proffered plan can be implemented successfully. It calls for specific descriptions of the mechanisms of research, showing concrete and sustainable means. In **storytelling**, we are looking for a resolution and for attempts at settling the problem. The writer describes the plan to resolve the issue through maintaining the flow of the proposal narrative by moving away from abstract concepts and by providing detail and answers to questions such as: How do you plan to satisfactorily settle this issue or offer an alternative? What activities do you plan to pursue this goal and how viable are they?

Conclusion: In this section, the writer may restate the issue and purpose, rearticulate the solution, outline recommendations, and otherwise bring the proposal to a conclusion.

In **storytelling**, we call this a **resolution**: it's about the future. The writer ought to help readers see that a resolution has been achieved. If the reader can interpret the aesthetic experience in the story as it related to his or her own life, the story would have succeeded in engaging and maintaining the readers' interest throughout, and would hopefully have persuaded them on the merits of the issue.

Other Proposal Elements:
Title
Project Plan

Qualifications
Costs / Benefits
Schedule of activities to meet the target

Audience: Who would find this issue /story of interest? Why? What do they already know? What do they need to know? We are thinking here of **audience** and levels of audience. What is at stake for this group of interested parties? **Significance:** The importance of details, and the persuasive techniques needed to move this audience and maintain their interest.

Note that the introductory and background sections of the proposal can be deemed qualitative in that they introduce the issue under inquiry through a temporal ordering of events suggesting causality. The critical aspect of that phase can be initiated when the referential meaning of those facts is made apparent. What then happens is that patterns among those facts begin to emerge along with the broader implications beyond that single issue. This qualitative phase is then complicated by the quantitative facts – in the form of data, statistics – surrounding the issue. And, of course, in answering the "so what" question at the end of the problem statement, the writer can make a connection to larger socioeconomic concerns. The writer should aim to build an internally consistent rendering of past events and how they speak to the present by augmenting them with meaning through fidelity and coherence.

Privacy issues preclude me from reprinting an entire 10–12-page proposal here. Instead, below I provide a composite of student work that approximates the narrative of the proposal, often the comprehensive description of the proposal's essence. The first one I am calling *BikeShare*.

Proposal I: *BikeShare*
Draft 1
Oakwood College's BikeShare program can be improved. Right now, the bikes are scattered all over campus and sometimes stolen. The program was supposed to help students on campus. Now students have no bikes or there are too few bikes in the morning when students need them. It's frustrating to get to a docking station and being unable to take out bikes. And yet bike sharing has been very useful for students. This needs to change. I have a solution for this problem. In this proposal, I hope to set up a system that will revive the BikeShare program and make it viable again. Students, faculty and staff of Oakwood should be interested to see this program succeed. They are my audience. Also, my solutions are designed to put an end to all this mess with the BikeShare program once and for all.

BikeShare's initial draft is informal and does not cohere well. To help the writer of *BikeShare* attend to all the details of his proposal, I asked him to begin with the narrative of the proposal and to focus on that persuasive purpose as it relates to his reader. I tried to coax him to supply greater detail, clarifications, and purpose within that rhetorical context by asking for a more detailed description of the program. Specifically, I asked for such details as:

- When and how did the Bikeshare program start? I was looking here for specific dates, names, place.
- What were the terms of bikesharing at the program's launch?
- Did that work out well? I wanted the writer to tease out the not-so-obvious problematic issues that might arise with this arrangement and describe the honor system.
- How long before the honor system collapsed, and what causes led (in)directly to its collapse?
- What is the state of the *BikeShare* program now?
- How much does the *BikeShare* program mean to the campus (audience)?
- Is it salvageable (realistic solutions, not pie-in-the-sky generalizations)?
- How does your solution differ from what you identified in the existing honor system, and why will that yield different results?

I stressed that rather than respond to these questions as a Q&A list, the response needed to be woven together coherently into a narrative that tied the loose ends together. Below is *BikeShare* in revised form.

> ***BikeShare*, Draft 2**
> *In July 2010, Oakland College created a Bike Share program intended to ease transportation for students, staff, and faculty across campus. The program was set up under an honors system that allowed individuals to pick up a bike from any one of the docking stations strategically located across campus with the expectation that it'd be docked into a station closest to the user's destination. Designed to serve the campus community at no cost at all, the system worked well until about six months into its launch. At that point, incidents of misuse and neglect became rampant. Students quickly forgot the honors code, with some throwing bikes into the pond behind the dorms and others stealing the bikes or taking them off campus never to be returned again. Other incidents of abuse include students doing tricks such as dirt jumping the bikes*

off steep embankments. Needless to say, the bikes not only began to fall apart, but their circulation was greatly curtailed. These bikes are not made for such extreme sports and so naturally they easily fall apart. The most common problem that I witness occurs when the bike isn't docked into the bike rack. It becomes vulnerable to being tossed around and left to the mercy of the elements.

BikeShare's proposal revision after my feedback was a remarkable improvement over the first draft. The revised version included specific details. It also dispensed with some of the more generalized language of the initial draft. More importantly, *BikeShare* recognized that the proposal convention that separates introductory content from the Methods section worked well organizationally. This second introduction also made it possible for the writer of *BikeShare* to infer directly from the issues he raises to the solutions he envisages, thus showing rhetorical skill.

The second proposal I am using as an illustration I call *College Tuition*:

Proposal II: *College Tuition*

Draft 1

The purpose of this proposal is to make college education affordable for all. Me and my friends are taking on a lot of student loans because of the rising costs of college education. Everyone wishes that they would be successful in life. This is not something you can wish for or have handed to you. Everyone needs some kind of education in order to succeed in life or in the world today. There is always some kind of aid out there to help an individual go to school, but is it always enough? While most students succeed in school there are some who struggle financially and that is the main reason why they do not succeed. What happens when the student does not have parents to help them fill out their FAFSA? A long process is involved, and less money is distributed to the student due to the absence of a parent. This is not fair to students who fall within this category.

My feedback to this draft is similar to that on the first draft of *BikeShare*. The second draft which the student produced follows.

***College Tuition*, Draft 2**

Not long ago, a high school (HS) education in the United States was sufficient. People with a high school education qualified for entry jobs and worked their way up the corporate ladder with that basic education. They were able to build the American dream, not to mention securing a college education for their own children. The

2007–2008 economic downturn, however, has wiped out those gains completely. Many of those workers formerly secure in their jobs were laid off. As manufacturing positions began to open up, the kinds of jobs available for those with a HS education were gone. Only those with specialized skills, often obtained at a four-year university stood a chance of being hired.

Consistently, statistics from organizations that research data on higher education, such as the American Council on Education (2012), show that people with a college education have found employment at a higher rate than those with just a HS education or GED. Specifically, a report by Spreen (2013) showed that the unemployment rate for people with college degrees had fallen to 4.2 percent, while for those with only a high school diploma or GED it was nearly three times as high, at 13.2 percent. This realization, combined with the economic downturn has created a pent-up demand for college education. Thus it cannot be good that over the last three decades, the average tuition at a public university has more than tripled, even as the typical family's income has gone up just 16 percent (Mann, 2013). Data released by colleges across the country indicate that older people are attending college (for the first time) at a high rate. But here is the catch; high costs of college have meant that even fewer families can afford a college education.

These rising costs have left families feeling trapped and bewildered For one thing, most families have been unable build up enough savings and do not qualify for federal support. How can we redeem the tradition of a country that has always made a commitment to putting a good education within the reach of young people willing to study? My intent in this proposal is to explore the possibilities our local communities and elected officials can do to support this generation of young people pursue a college education.

As we read the proposal about college tuition, we begin to see beyond the needs of an individual student worrying about her college costs, and look to the bigger crisis threatening the livelihoods of a multigeneration of people. Some of those affected by high college tuition were once set in their careers, which got disrupted during the economic crisis of the late 2000s. That crisis ushered in a shift in productivity and technology investment, leaving millions of workers redundant and or insufficiently skilled. Others are the up-and-coming generation of younger people, newly graduated from high school and now pursuing higher education.

The revised draft of *College Tuition* conveys speech, voice, and presence. These distinctions are important because they suggest immediacy between the tale, its narrator, and the listeners. It appears to present circumstance, lived or reported, and in such a setting, the meaning becomes a shared experience between writer and reader as opposed to an assertion of logical analytical facts. This same sense conveys the expectation that any questions that arise in the progression of the story will be answered by the story itself.

If we focus on the build-up to the resolution of that story and the steps it will take to get there, we uncover some important issues that go beyond the cost of college. In the revision, we see that the issue which the student has identified is not so much high-rising college tuition rates, because people can argue that not everyone needs to go to college. Yet others can argue that college should be left to those who can afford it. What is at stake here that the student's story manages to uncover is the reality of the U.S. economy in the present day and how it places a premium on a college education. Placed as audience of this story in such a historical context, we come to see, through the student's careful story building, that economic downturns have corresponding consequences for the workforce.

In these two examples, narrative, as an organizing principle for both proposals, helps illuminate latent concerns surrounding each issue. Most of my comments in response to initial drafts are directed toward the proposals' ability to persuade the reader. I stress that the proposal's persuasiveness lies in the narrative. Specifically, I emphasize that detail is crucial to the clarity of the proposal, precisely because it forces students to think more concretely about what they're proposing. This, obviously, requires research into the specifics of the problem and substantive plans for implementation.

Conclusion

The storytelling model asks instructors who teach proposal writing to consider what students gain when they adopt stories. The cohesive nature of stories, as well as their interactive and dialogic aspects, work rhetorically to appeal to readers. Because events are temporally ordered, the writer–reader communion is maximized through interpretive nuances as the narrative progresses. What is of essence is the epistemic function of the story in giving answers to the implicit causes shaping the particular contingencies of the tale that readers can empathize with and are sufficiently persuaded by to be invested in finding a resolution.

A good story is memorable and might also tug at our heartstrings; it appeals to our sense of lived experience and the values that inform those experiences. Taking up narrative persuasion as a pedagogical tool in

teaching proposals lies in the formal properties of the story – properties that constitute the parts from which the meaning of the story is derived, which persuade audiences and lead to resolution. Since we take seriously our goal of preparing our students for professional communication, we ought to be open to adapting the pedagogy of storytelling, as an especially powerful means of persuasion.

About the Author

Josephine Walwema is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric at Oakland University, where she teaches courses in technical and professional communication, global and legal rhetorics. She obtained her Ph.D. from Clemson University, where she studied in the Rhetoric, Communication and Information Design (RCID) program. She has presented at national and international conferences on approaches to teaching and learning in professional writing.

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