Looking for Trouble (2)

A Story Makes an Argument, An Argument Tells a Story

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I argued last time that conflict is driven in part by our many-layered motivation and in part by all the crucial ways in which relationships can be sabotaged by misbehavior and by misunderstandings. Now I'd like to show how the complexity of motivation and human relationship can be staged dramatically through plot structure. By "plot" I mean something very simple--a logical and chronological sequence of events that an author works out ahead of time. This sequence provides the substructure for the narrative proper: the narrative can describe these events in different ways for different strategic and artistic purposes. Plot can be fractured, splintered, upended, excerpted, rearranged, and depicted from multiple conflicting points of view. But prior to any of those post-modern literary choices, at some point in the creative process storytellers have to devise for themselves a plain, old-fashioned, linear account of What Happened. *What Happened* is what I mean here by "plot."

 Nonfiction writers also have to figure out what is to happen--what is to happen to the reader, what is to happen with or to the problem at hand. In their brilliant book *The Craft of Argument*, Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb lay out a structure for introductions or introductory chapters. Their structure transparently mirrors ordinary plot structure.[1] The same basic structure appears in narrative nonfiction: in a recent issue of *The Writer's Chronicle,* Douglas Whynott argued quite persuasively that nonfiction narratives make use of organizational structures that also closely resemble the basic five-part plot structure of stories.[2] Scholars in a variety of fields have argued that narrative is how the human mind organizes information of any kind, of every kind: narrative is fundamental to what we mean by "meaning."[3] It's no surprise, then, that we can find similar principles of organization if we step back to just the right distance and

squint a little.

Once upon a time, far away and long ago, I was taught that the five parts of a plot are are each named with labels that begin with the letter "C." This was so long ago that I confess I don't remember what those labels were supposed to be--and I've never been able to find the source of this carved-in-stone assertion. But to keep my ghosts happy, I've made up the following names for these five parts: context, complication, crisis, confrontation, and consequences. For nonfiction argument, and following *The Craft of Argument*, the five steps of a formal argument are common ground, problem, cost or significance of problem, solution (major claim), and support. (Everything except the support will appear in the introduction or introductory chapters.) I think it helps to see these side-by-side:

	Narrative	Argument
1.	Context	Common Ground
2.	Complication	Problem
3.	Conflict	Cost or Significance of Problem
4.	Confrontation	Solution or Major Claim
5.	Consequences	Supporting argument

Depending upon genre and other decisions a writer makes, the number of words or pages devoted to each of these five parts will differ quite substantially. In particular, the supporting argument in persuasive nonfiction is easily eighty percent of the whole. Nonetheless there are good reasons to look at a few fundamental structural similarities. Doing so helps nonfiction writers to recognize that a good argument--an engaging, worthwhile argument--must have its own narrative coherence and dramatic tension. A good argument tells a good story. And I think it helps narrative writers to recognize that

a convincing story has a certain logical substructure. A good story makes a good argument; it convincingly interprets the events it narrates. Although narrative and non-narrative writers the relative proportions or sizes of each section differ dramatically. It seems to me that the core of how fiction and fact converge is the extent to which both kinds of writers must attend carefully to the rich complexity of human motive. What makes a convincing story convincing, or a persuasive argument persuasive, is how successfully the author has organized and managed the human response to a problem. The five-part structure is a simple tool for thinking about the complex dimensions of that managerial task

1. context/ common ground

Our first task as writers is to engage the reader: to get the reader in the door, curious, and settled down comfortably, willing to listen. Colomb and Williams call this moment the establishing of a "common ground" with the reader. Fiction and nonfiction alike begin with a status quo, with an equilibrium. Maybe it's only an apparent equilibrium, or maybe it's a highly unstable status quo, but it's where the telling of the story begins: "Once upon a time, far away and long ago . . .". In tightly written short stories, this can be as little as a single sentence. But the common-ground or equilibrium statement remains the first and perhaps the key moment for establishing the author's credibility with the reader. That's true even of query letters--perhaps especially of query letters. Beginnings matter. Whynott argues that the opening passage commonly establishes the terms or the imagery with which the conclusion will eventually be framed.

2. Complication/ Problem

Something happens. A "situation" comes up, an event. In a story, this event provides our first glimpse of major characters. The event can seem to be something perfectly ordinary: a snow storm knocks down a pine tree. Or the event can be dramatic: a dead body is found in the basement of the library. Or the event can be something entirely interior to a character: Mildred decides to take an art course. Memoirs and narrative nonfiction also have an initiating incident or recognition and, simultaneously, some

introduction to major characters.

In arguments and persuasive essays, the "complication" must have a strong logical relationship to the common ground. "All of us know it is important to eat properly" might be the common ground. The complicating factor--the problem to be solved--is that in our society, with all its junk food and fast food and highly processed food, eating properly is far more difficult than most people realize. This early in the game, of course, the reader may not recognize just how hard it is to define what "eating *properly"* means, or why the abundance of our food choices is so problematic. But we must be persuaded to care, to be curious, to be puzzled now over realities that yesterday we took for granted. In exactly the same way, the reader of a story may not initially understand how much is involved with Mildred deciding to take an art class--but something must make this fact stand out as worthy of our attention.

In his study of narrative nonfiction structures, Whynott describes this second stage as a biographical or autobiographical "digression" because of its focus on a character. He's quite persuasive on that point, but he also argues that the themes and issues introduced at this point are crucially important set-ups for the crisis that is to come. There's nothing literally "digressive" at all. The key, then, or the challenge at this point, is to present the initiating complication or the initial problem in ways that let the reader begin to suspect that something substantial is at stake.

For persuasive writers, the common mistake in first chapters is presenting far too much data about the problem at hand. All that supporting data will be much more effective later on, in a body chapter where it belongs. Here we need just enough of a glimpse to recognize that a given situation is problematic. We need that to build that framework for ourselves before we can appreciate the data. In stories, the common mistake at this point is a similarly indigestible lump in which too many indistinguishable characters and too much complicated backstory are foisted upon the reader all at once. Instead of delivering that great lump of backstory, we need just enough information about a character to create a distinct impression. One such glimpse, then, might be allowing a few characters to begin to respond in their own ways to the initiating event. They react

well, they react badly, they react wisely, they react foolishly. We catch a glimpse of a position, or an interest, a key value or a hot-button wired into backstory. We can begin to construct for ourselves a framework in which this initiating event begins to feel both significant and intriguing.

As readers we don't yet know why these people are responding as they do--but we can begin to care about the complexity of their responses. The author knows why, of course, because the characters' reactions are shaped by the dense fabric of their personality traits, gender, ethnicity, layers upon layers of motive, and who-knows what-all that the writer has worked out ahead of time. Hinting at the reasons for these responses is one way to build dramatic tension.

3. Crisis/ Cost of Problem

If characters reacted to an event but said nothing to one another, or did nothing that impinged upon one another's interests, there would be no story to tell. And so the third step in thinking through a plot, logically speaking, involves turning from character's initial responses to their actions and especially to their interactions.

All holy hell breaks loose, in short. Characters discover how invested they are as they argue their positions with other characters, and as they take action on their positions (with or without consultation, sensitivity, and foresight). Relationships deepen. Relationships explode. Doors are slammed. Lovers embrace. Meanwhile, of course, the initiating event can continue to unfold on its own: something else can happen, and then something after that, quite independent of these characters, their actions, and their interactions. As all this mayhem erupts, the reader begins to appreciate the implications or the significance of the initiating event or situation.

In nonfiction, or in rhetorical terms, this step in the "plot" is delineating the cost or significance of the problem at hand. The "cost" or "significance" of a problem is the framework that makes the problem important or meaningful *to a particular audience.* Explaining the cost or significance is also, in effect, describing all hell breaking loose. Or how it will break loose if nothing is done. Understanding the significance of the

problem is as important to persuasive writing as dramatic tension is for storytellers. But to understand how to define effective significance, nonfiction writers have to know the positions, interests, and values of their imagined primary audience. Nonfiction writers need to imagine their audience in almost as much detail as fiction writers imagine their characters. Both kinds of writers need to do so because motive matters most at this third step in the structure. Motive drives both action and argument, and it does so for fiction and nonfiction alike.

Agents complain all the time that nonfiction writers have not thought carefully enough or in sufficient detail about who would be interested reading their book.[4] If that's true, it's a problem for persuasion, not just for sales: We can only persuade by reference to our reader's pre-existing interests, values, and personal identity issues.

In his book on food choices, for instance, Michael Pollan addresses an audience primarily concerned about the environmental impact of their food choices. That's their core value. Taste, nutrition, and moral concern about animal abuse are very important interests for Pollan and for his primary audience, but it is a secondary interest. Environment is the core value. In her book about food choices, Kingsolver's addresses an audience for whom taste and nutrition are the core value and environmental impacts etc. are secondary interests. Very important, yes, but secondary. At every point along the way, their slightly different decisions about what audience to address dictates how they manage the material they are presenting to us. Both of them are trying to persuade us to change our current position, which is eating more or less the ordinary American diet. Both authors assume that if we understood the conflict between our current eating habits and our core values that we would eat differently. We would change our position.

For instance, both authors warn that out-of-season fruits and vegetables are apt to taste like cardboard; both point out that such imports also demand remarkable quantities of fossil fuel. But in delicate, reasonable ways, each author weights these observations somewhat differently. They do so in part by setting their observations into different contexts. These differences reflect the different ways in which they imagine

what matters most to their key audience. Every step of the way, then, how clearly we understand our readers will dictate how--and how adeptly--we manage the argument we are making. The classic agent's question, "who will buy this book?" is one that any author needs to answer very early in the writing process.

4. Confrontation/ Solution

After a certain point, any real conflict will escalate to a crisis, to a confrontation in which decisive action is taken. In real life, negotiators insist, everyone involved has contributed to the mess one way or another. No one is totally innocent.[5] Everyone has identity issues at stake. Everyone has interests and values at stake. And no one is entirely conscious of all these dimensions.

The confrontation scene (or scenes) display conflict and conflict-mediation in all of its complexity. Peacemaking characters seek compromise and mutual understanding. Trouble-makers misbehave: blaming, judging, and personal attack; contempt, sarcasm, and dismissal; defensiveness and denial; stonewalling.[6] Backstory erupts into foreground as characters revert to deep old patterns of behavior or as relationships dance again to very old and destructive tunes. Other characters wake up from enchantment by their own past, stepping out into behavior that is new but far more authentic to their interests and values. Regional, cultural, and linguistic differences that triggered misunderstandings may--or may not--get sorted out. Gender differences may lead to even deeper conflict, to unexpectedly adept complementary action, or to same-sex characters bonding in unexpected ways. Just about anything can happen--and does happen--but to be convincing it has to evolve coherently out of how <u>these</u> particular characters with <u>these</u> particular backstories now react, interact, and hence resolve (or detonate) <u>this</u> particular problem.

The nonfiction version of the confrontation is called the major claim. The major claim proposes a solution to the complicated problem defined in the second step of the argument. Proposing the solution is the nonfiction equivalent of the confrontational scene resolving the conflict in a story.

Because humans are such instinctive storytellers, we all realize that the confrontation in a story has to develop logically out of the crisis at hand and then bring that crisis to some sort of resolution. The same necessity appears in persuasive writing: the solution or the major claim must address or resolve exactly those costs of the problem that have already been delineated. The match-up here between costs and remedies is crucial to motivating our readers to accept the major claim or the solution we propose.

In my editorial experience, however, mismatch is very common. It's such a common problem, I suspect, because inexperienced writers do not stop to consider the key interests and values that motivate their major audiences. It's easy enough to be blinded to such considerations by one's own delight in the topic--or by years of experience in which teachers were captive readers. But such blindness can be devastating for the professional. Like inexperienced novelists, such writers have failed to work up the backstory in enough detail--the <u>readers'</u> backstory. And that hampers their ability to manage motivation--the <u>reader's</u> motivation. The persuasiveness of persuasive writing is all about managing that motivation. As I said before, the cost or the significance of a problem has to be significance *for a particular audience.* It's not enough that <u>we</u> find the topic interesting or important. We have to entice readers into seeing it that way too.

In narrative nonfiction, the confrontation is situated fairly late in the manuscript, just as it is in a novel. But in persuasive nonfiction, the major claim ordinarily appears toward the end of the first chapter. The body chapters then provide an array of evidence and warrants that the major claim is true or the proposed solution will succeed. That means that the first chapter of a persuasive argument is, in effect, much like a short story. The first chapter of a nonfiction argument follows a plot-like structure that commonly get us all the way out to the resolution of the conflict--to the "major claim." From that point forward, the organization of evidence and warrant for the major claim is shaped in part by the demands of logic, and in part by the drama of persuasion. Debate about such organizational issues was well-developed in classical antiquity. Much more recently, Colomb and Williams delineate with exceptional clarity the options and the issues one should consider.[7]

Despite how early the "crisis" is resolved in a nonfiction argument, figuring out one's major claim requires just as much work as getting to and through the crisis scene of a long novel. We have to work our way through the research we have assembled just as slowly and thoughtfully as novelists work their way, scene by scene, through the reactions, interactions, and backstories of their characters. The difference is simply that *by convention* certain kinds of formal arguments begin by telling you how the story will end. Needless to say, that also means that the first chapter is always the last chapter to be fully revised.

In fact, it may be wise simply to sketch this chapter lightly or casually until <u>after</u> there are solid drafts of the body chapters. Fiction writers sometimes say that they write to see what will happen to their characters. To some real extent that's true of persuasive nonfiction writers too: we do this research or we have done this research because we are want to know where it will lead. But until we have written up our research fully, we don't know where our research has gotten us. Not exactly. We have some initial impressions, some very good guesses, perhaps, but that's all.

Many decades ago, my dissertation director cautioned me not to write my first chapter first. Write the easiest chapter first, he said--the one where my research was clearest or easiest to describe or where my judgments were most confident. Then write the next-easiest chapter. Hold off on a polished draft of my first chapter, he said, until I had good working drafts of the body chapters. You can't introduce what doesn't yet exist, he warned me.

That was sage advice, especially for someone trying to write her very first book. Only after we have written up our research finding will we know exactly how we want to formulate the key problem and how we want to structure our appeal to our key audience. *Prior to that point*, a brief precis of an introduction is probably all we need: a paragraph of common ground, a paragraph of problem, a paragraph of cost, a paragraph of major claim. In fact, these can be entirely separate little paragraphs: there is no need to to create a smoothly flowing discourse, because all that matters is getting the logic laid out correctly and clearly. The novice mistake is to re-write and to

re-re-re-write the first chapter as each body chapter starts to take shape, each time foisting into the first chapter an indigestible lump of information that belongs in a body chapter. That way lies madness.

5. Consequences / Support

How to manage the body chapters of a formal argument is a topic unto itself, one brilliantly explored by Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb in *The Craft of Argument.* The evidence for a major claim, and the warrants for this evidence, will ordinarily come to a logical closure or culmination all their own: the conclusion may be nothing more than a few paragraphs or pages neatly closing off the final point. That little is usually enough because so very much thought has gone into sequencing major points persuasively.

Where to end a story in a narrative--or how to end it--can be a more elusive matter. Action-heavy plots may come to an obvious end, but stories relatively more centered on character and motive may have a harder time ending neatly. What we are looking for, I propose, is what T. S. Eliot described in "Little Gidding": "the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time."[8] This criteria can be met--perhaps it must be met--even when we have on hand a decisive final action, like the death of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth.*

But how do we get to that point? If we go into too much detail, we launch ourselves into another story, another book. If we say too little, we leave our readers up in the air, unsatisfied. Our story remains much too open-ended. Life itself is open-ended, of course; but a satisfying book comes to a good end. We close it and we feel finished with something a very real pleasure that life itself seldom affords. We have gotten somewhere. We have achieved something.

How do we create that illusion? When I'm stuck, I begin by re-reading my opening pages, Then I make myself a pot of tea settle back to remember the very first time I drove through mountains. I was in my thirties; I'd lived my whole life in the flatlands of the Midwest. When a scenic overlook appeared on the side of the road, I pulled over

gratefully. I pried my hands from the steering wheel and stepped out of the car gingerly. Once I was sure my knees would not buckle, I walked cautiously across the crushed gravel to the bumper-high railing around the small parking lot, gazing out and down at a terrain unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

From where I stood, I could see the long looping ribbon of switchbacks I'd been traveling all afternoon. I'd never driven switchbacks before. I didn't know what they were. I'd found all the hairpin turns both terrifying and inexplicable. But now, looking down the mountainside, I could see where I had started, and what I had been though. The drive made sense. I had gotten somewhere. It felt just like finishing a good book.

I stood there, staring, for a long time. *Last chapters feel exactly like this*, I realized. Last chapters are like looking out over asphalt looped down a mountainside. Ahah. I had no intention of driving in the mountains ever again, not ever again; but I expected plenty of last chapters on the road of life before me. I was mesmerized.

In a successful conclusion, everything that was unconscious or implicit in the opening pages becomes both conscious and explicit--for our characters and our readers alike. These things become conscious and explicit not because we spell everything out, but because the major <u>consequences</u> of these events have become clear. We have gotten to a point where we can pause--where we can pull off the road for a minute--to see where we have been. If life we too often go whizzing by these scenic overlooks, but as writers we must create them for our readers. Fiction, narrative nonfiction, even the most rigorous persuasive arguments--every good work ends with a view out and down over the terrain we have traveled together. We have gotten somewhere.

So where have <u>we</u> gotten to in all this exploring? To this point, I think: every writer, in every genre, is at work on human relationships. How we relate to ourselves, to our own goals, needs, dreams, and past history. How we relate to others across the huge tangle of human desires and despite the array of differences that can open up like chasms among us. How we cope with the dizzying switchbacks of complicated conflicts and

difficult situations.

Writers recount the problems people face whether we are telling a story that begins with a single tree falling across a fence in a blizzard, or whether we are writing a long, complicated argument about food production and consumption in a post-industrial society. Writers are trouble-makers--or at least trouble-seekers--because we are driven to figure things out. We are trying to figure out the world around us--the people, the events, the issues, the choices people dare to make, or fear to make, or fail to recognize as options.

Writers go looking for real trouble because we are looking for the meanings and the needs that motivate human actions and reactions. Making real trouble is our way of exploring what it means to be human.

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1 Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb, *The Craft of Argument*, second edition (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2003).
2 Douglas Whynott, "Some Thoughts on Nonfiction Book Structures," *The Writers' Chronicle,* May/Summer 2008.
3 There is a general scholarly consensus that narrative structures permeate critical thinking at any level because *story* is the fundamental pattern whereby we remember information. An excellent overview of the evidence for this claim is Stephen Prickett, *Narrative, Religion, and Science: Fundamentalism Versus Irony, 1700-1999*) New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
4 See *Making the Perfect Pitch: How to Catch a Literary Agent's Eye*, ed. Katharine Sands (Waukesha WI: The Writer Books, 2004).
5 This point is made most centrally in Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheilaµ Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (New York: Penguin, 1999).
6 This list is from Gottman, *Seven Principles*, pp. 27-34.
7 Colomb and Williams, *Craft of Argument,* especially chapters 3-5.
8 T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets,* section V, lines 240-242.