

Academic Writing Is a Team Sport

2025 Moerschbaeche Academic Forum

Department of Orthopaedic Surgery
in collaboration with the Faculty Development Committee

Winning with Words: Using Narrative Style to Engage Readers



*Rachel Walden, MS, ELS
Department of Orthopaedic Surgery
The Johns Hopkins School of Medicine
April 11, 2025*

I have no conflicts of
interest to disclose.

Introductions

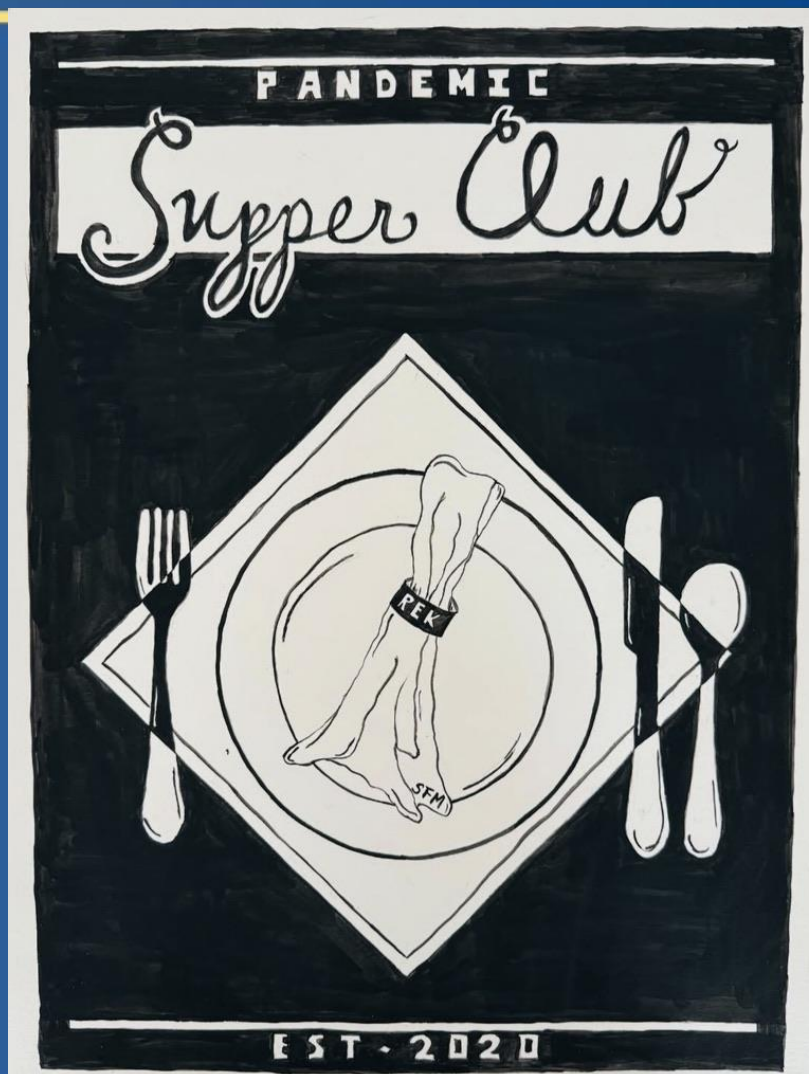
About me

Rachel Walden, MS, ELS

- JHU Ortho since 2014
- Dir. of Editorial Services
- Asst. Professor
- Formerly at *Am J Epidemiology*
- Teaching & coaching writers

A story about me

- 144 dinners to date
- Also in Alexandria, NYC, and NOLA!
- 16 total dinner guests



Learning objectives

1. Describe the elements of narrative style.
2. Identify and define your audience(s) for any piece of writing.
3. Understand how to overcome the challenges in using narrative style.

Learn from the (Hollywood) experts

"Houston, we've had
a problem here"



Jack Swigert, 1970

"Houston, we have a
problem."



Tom Hanks, 1995

Question

What percentage of article you read in
your field are truly *enjoyable*?

Medical storytelling has evolved

Case report from 1869

Case of Dislocation of the Patella, Inwards

By Dr. Ratton, Civil Surgeon
The Indian Medical Gazette
August 2, 1869

Ratton, 1869

“J.B., a strong, well-made man, was thrown violently from his dog-cart on the 12th instant; he at once complained of a rending pain in the knee and felt as if his leg were immovably fixed in a vice.

Ratton, 1869

I was fortunately at hand, and on examining the knee, found the patella well to the inner side of the joint, pressing on the inner aspect of the inner tuberosity of the tibia, to which it was superimposed, the leg flexed, and immovable, the foot extremely everted, and raised from the ground; patient vomiting frequently and suffering severely from shock.

Ratton, 1869

I at once drew the patella forcibly to its proper position, at the same time extending the leg, and rotating inwards, it returned with a very distinct snap and was followed by a sense of great relief to the patient.

Ratton, 1869

The day after the accident, the knee was swollen to nearly double the size of its fellow; on the following day inflammation threatened, quickly checked, however, by the application of twelve leeches.

Ratton, 1869

The knee is now doing well, though considerably swollen and discolored. A back splint and cold lotions are being used. I am induced, from seeing in *Erichsen's Surgery* that there is but one such case recorded, to send you the above particulars."

Questions

- What do you think about this case report?
- What do you like/dislike about it?
- How effective is it?

Fast-forward 155 years



Case report from 2024

Chronic Patellar Dislocation Treated With Extensive Lateral Release and Vastus Medialis Obliquus Advancement: A Case Report

Kelly SR et al
Case Rep Orthop
November 1, 2024

Kelly et al, 2024

The following case report demonstrates a case of a chronic irreducible patellar dislocation, age-indeterminate associated with a large medial patellar avulsion fracture that was treated with a vastus medialis obliquus advancement following an extensive lateral release.

Question

What impression do you have after reading
that first sentence?

Kelly et al, 2024

The following case report demonstrates a case of a chronic irreducible patellar dislocation, age-indeterminate associated with a large medial patellar avulsion fracture that was treated with a vastus medialis obliquus advancement following an extensive lateral release.



Behind every study is a story

Your study has...

- Characters: *Who?*
- Setting: *Where?*
- Plot: *What?*
- Conflict: *What?*

And you can bring...

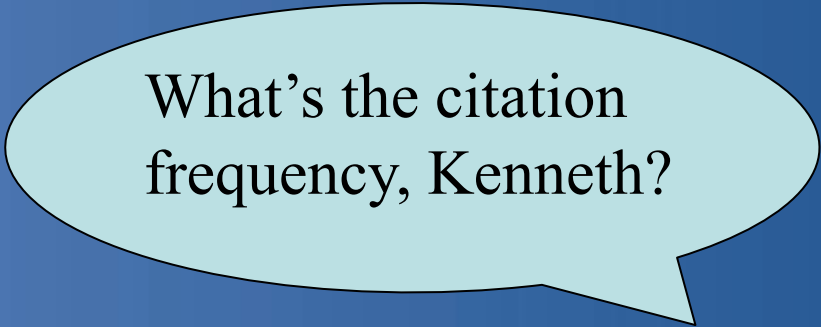
- Point of view
- Style

That's good news, because...

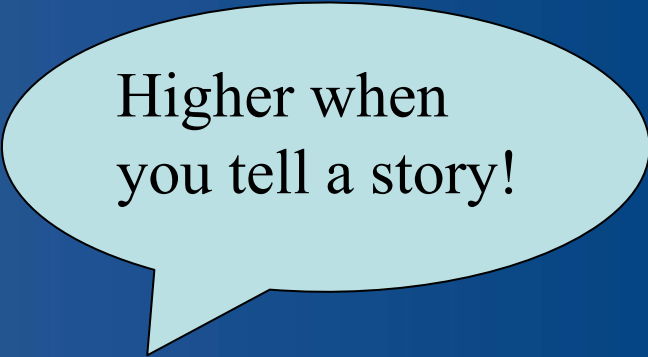


Humans
communicate and
remember
information best
through stories.

Evidence: citation frequency



What's the citation frequency, Kenneth?



Higher when you tell a story!

Storytelling style has been associated with greater citation frequency.

Your goals as an author



To communicate
information that
your readers will
remember.

(and to get cited)

Storytelling helps



Overcoming obstacles

If storytelling is so great, why doesn't everyone do it?

- *Few good examples*
- *Culture of formality*
- *Publisher restrictions*
- *Lack of awareness/training*

How do we use narrative style?

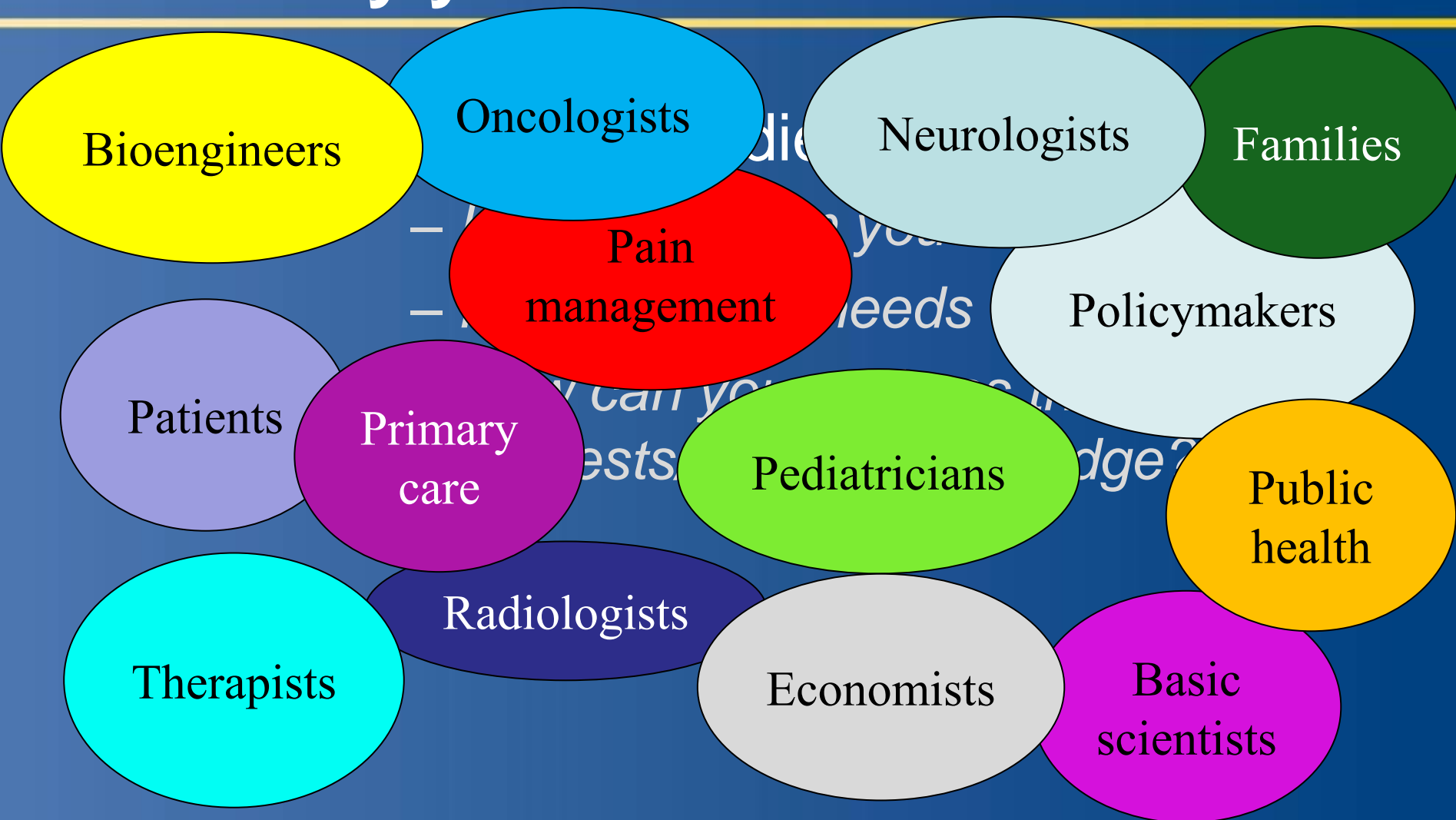
Identify your audiences



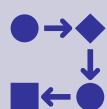
Primary audience

- *What do they know?*
- *What do they not know?*
- *Why should they care about your findings? How can they use them?*

Identify your audiences



Perspective shift



We begin from our *own* perspective



Excellent writers adopt the *reader's* perspective



We choose a journal based on audience

Use the elements

Elements of narrative style

- *setting*
- *narrative perspective*
- *sensory language*
- *conjunctions*
- *connectivity*
- *appeal*

Use the elements

Elements of narrative style

- *setting*
- *narrative perspective*
- *sensory language*
- *conjunctions*
- *connectivity*
- *appeal*



Significantly correlated
with citation frequency
(controlling for no. of
authors, IF, year of
pub., abstract length)

The key elements explained

#1: setting



where and when the
study took place

examples of setting

We surveyed patients in the orthopaedic spine clinic at our urban US tertiary care hospital from January 17 through July 25, 2024

Since 2020, nearly 200,000 ACL reconstructions have been performed annually in the United States

In our institution's biomechanics laboratory, we prepared 7 fresh-frozen cadaveric specimens for testing.

#2: narrative perspective



use of first-person
language

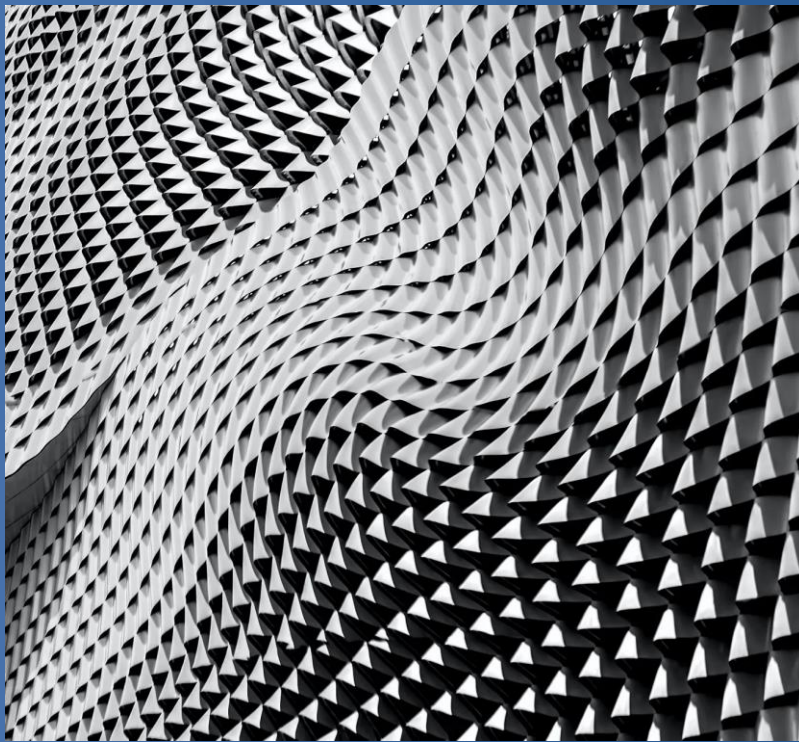
examples of narrative perspective

In this cross-sectional study, **we** assessed...

Our findings suggest...

Since 2018, the policy at **our** institution has been...

#3: sensory language



appeals to emotions

expresses
attitudes/beliefs

provides interpretation

examples of sensory language

It is important to consider that...

One of the greatest challenges facing our healthcare system is...

If these results can be replicated in a larger, long-term study, it
implies that...

#4: conjunctions



provide temporal
ordering

describe cause & effect

show movement forward

serve as logical
signposts

examples of conjunctions

In fact...

Therefore...

Recently...

In contrast...

First...

Because of this...

#5: connectivity



repetition of
words/phrases used in
adjacent sentences

examples of connectivity

Twenty-four **mice** were housed in accordance with IACUC guidelines. **Mice** were provided with...

Short-term heart-rate (HR) variability was measured in 28 participants. In 14 of these **participants**, **short-term HR variability** was consistent with respiration.

#6: appeal to reader



moral/evaluative
statements

recommendations

why the story matters

examples of appeal

The answers to these questions **are critical** to improving outcomes

Current practice heterogeneity **underscores the need** for standards

We recommend a lower transfusion threshold



A word on titles

Titles

The title is the start of your story

- *Is it boring?*
- *Is it too complex?*
- *Does it convey the most important information?*

Titles

Titles picked up on social media
tend to be

- *Shorter: 103 vs 109 characters*
- *Simpler: 3 vs 5 uncommon words*
- *Declarative: 30% vs 22%*



Altmetric

Titles

Recommendation

- *Draft several different titles for your paper*
- *Workshop them to peers and non-experts*
- *Choose/revise based on feedback*

Books on narrative style



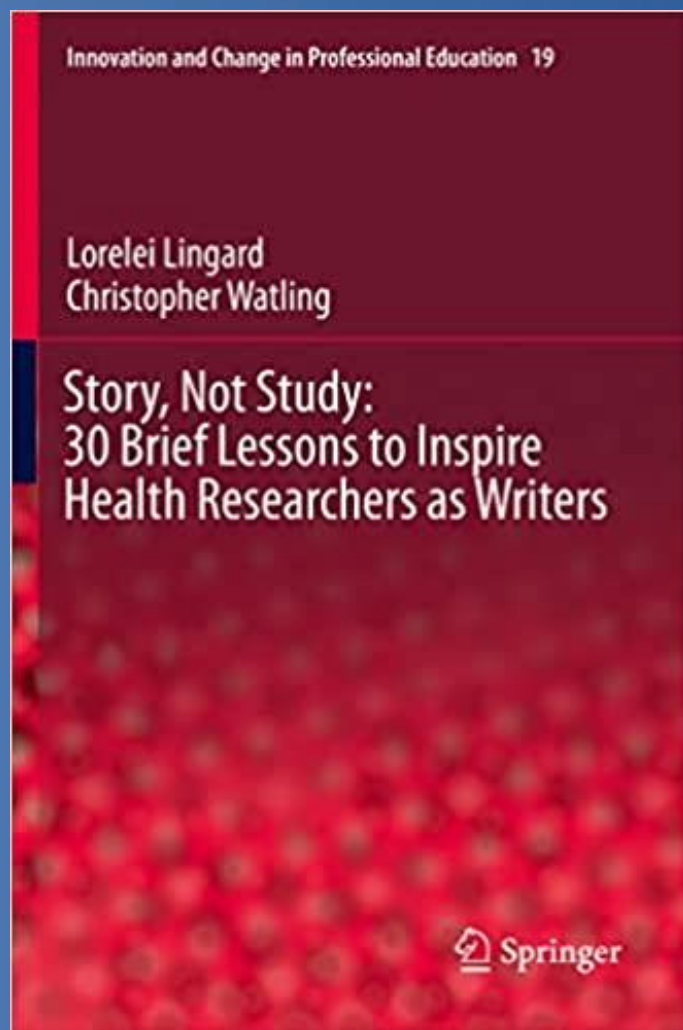
Learn the ABT strategy

“**A**nd” (momentum)

“**B**ut” (conflict)

“**T**herefore” (resolution)

building blocks of story



See one, do one, teach one

Short, easy-to-read chapters

Immediate improvement of
research writing

Academic
Writing
as if
Readers
Matter
Leonard
Cassuto

How to write better for

- specialized audiences
- broad audiences

Make complex ideas
compelling

Applying what you've learned

Identify narrative style



Using the CORR abstract on occupational hazards for ortho surgeons, mark the elements of narrative style you can find

Questions

Where did you find examples of...

- *setting?*
- *narrative perspective?*
- *sensory language?*
- *conjunctions?*
- *connectivity?*
- *appeal?*

Questions

Which narrative elements do you want to use more of in your own writing?



JOHNS HOPKINS
M E D I C I N E

DEPARTMENT OF
ORTHOPAEDIC SURGERY

Questions?

rachelwalden@jhu.edu