

Writing for Designers: Intro to Narrative Structure and Style

Anindita Basu Sempere
anindita@media.mit.edu

Introduction + Plan for the week

Introduction + Plan for the week

Workshop agenda and handouts are online here:

<https://anindita.org/writing-for-designers.html>

Introduction + Plan for the week

10:00 – 10:30 Check in / Q & A

10:30 – 12:00 Mini-Lesson / Exercises

12:00 – 1:00 Lunch

1:00 – 3:00 Mini-Lesson / Exercises / Workshop

3:00 – 6:00 Work time / Drop-in help / Individual meetings

Introduction + Plan for the week

Is there anything specific that you are hoping
to learn or to do this week?

Introduction + Plan for the week

What makes a piece of writing “good”?

Description & Directionality



Imagine you're a painter. What do you notice about this place?



Now you're a thief. What do you notice?

Description

The speaker's identity and worldview determine what is seen and how it is experienced.



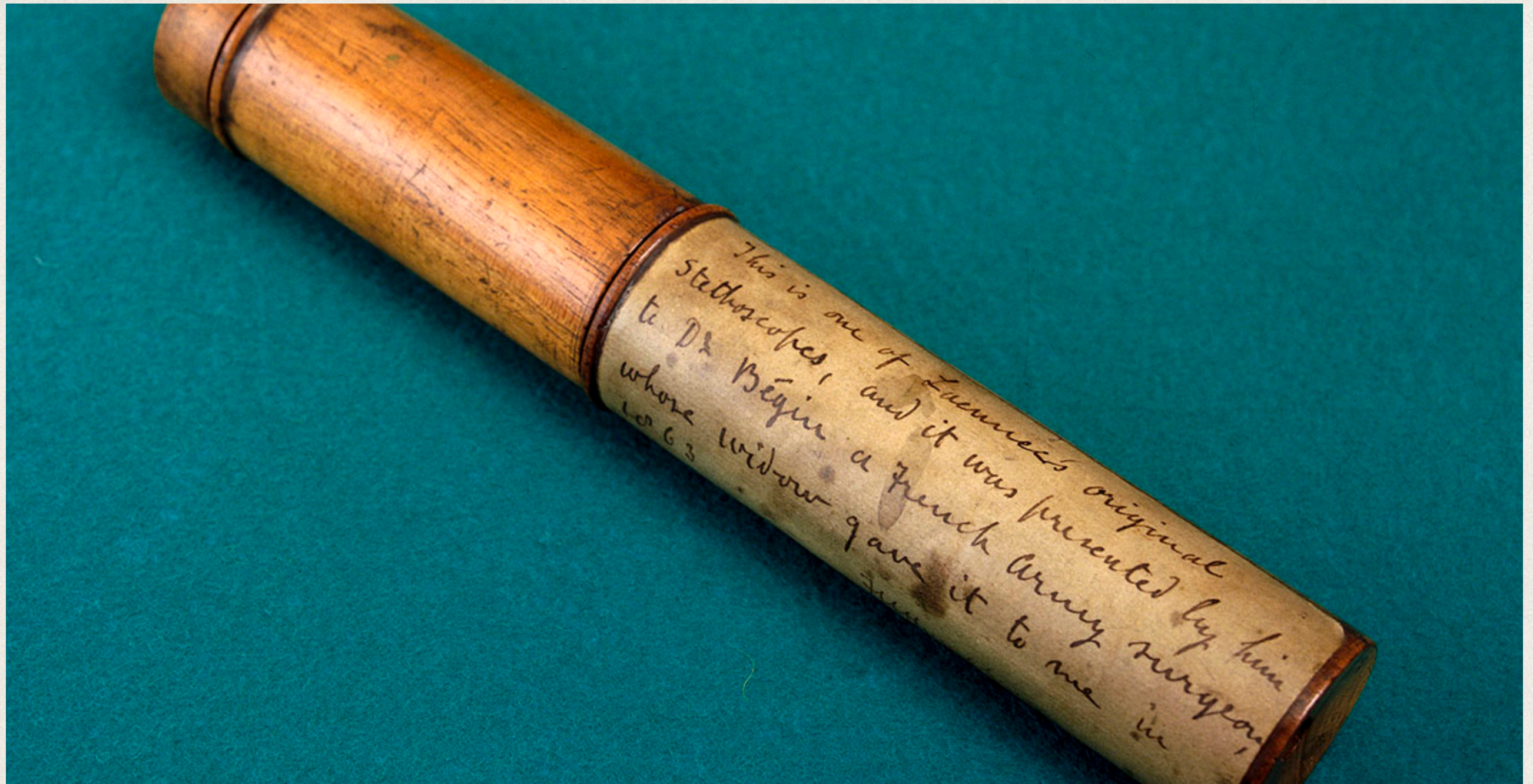
Describe this place after a fun, first date with someone you really like.



Describe this place after being dumped by someone you really liked.

Description

The speaker's emotions also shape the narrative and the experience.



The stethoscope was invented in 1816. Describe it as if you are a patient encountering it for the first time. (Historic context: The Napoleonic Wars have been over for a year. It's the "Year Without Summer" with summer frosts, crop failures, and food riots. Mary Shelley writes *Frankenstein*.)

Directionality

Use camera movement to shape the narrative

- ❖ Establishing shot -> Zoom in
- ❖ Begin with a closeup -> Zoom out

Directionality

How much context do you want the reader to have?
How much do they need to understand?

Description & Directionality

Other organizational principles?

Reverse Outlining/Narrative Structure

Reverse Outlining/Narrative Structure

Two reasons to reverse outline:

1. How did this author do it?
2. My writing no longer makes sense. What am I doing again?

Reverse Outlining Example: One Paragraph

Thesis/
Framing

Despite the academy's growing commitment to producing and publishing feminist interpretations of literary texts, insofar as feminist critics read Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as a novel about sexual liberation, we read it with our patriarchal biases **intact**. **Of course** *The Awakening*'s final scene is breathtaking; Edna Pontellier transcends her circumscribed status as sensual entity -- as the object of others' desires -- and stands before us as her own subject, as a blissfully embodied being: " .

Context

.. she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her" (136). It is because of this new dignity and visibility Chopin gives to women's desires that *The Awakening* has been celebrated as one of the great subversive novels -- a novel belonging to the tradition of

Suggested
structure

transgressive narratives Tony Tanner describes in *Adultery in the Novel*. **But** in this essay I will suggest that Tanner's ideas are inadequate to account for the real transgressive force of Chopin's novel. Instead, I want to locate this force in Chopin's representation of a language Edna Pontellier seeks but does not possess, in her representation of "a language which nobody understood."

Reverse Outlining/Narrative Structure

Opening paragraph / chapter

- ❖ Clear, specific
- ❖ Suggests a structure:
 - ❖ Problem + solution or
 - ❖ Thesis statement + support or...

Reverse Outlining/Narrative Structure

Excerpt from “The Age of Solastalgia” by Glenn Albrecht

- ❖ Why did Albrecht write this essay?
- ❖ What is the structure of this essay?
- ❖ What is the purpose of each paragraph?

Let's use highlighters to mark transitions and reveal the structure of this essay excerpt.

Reverse Outlining/Narrative Structure

In small groups, use sticky notes to create a reverse outline of “Living Like Weasels” by Annie Dillard.

- ❖ Number the paragraphs.
- ❖ Use one sticky note per paragraph.
- ❖ Change colors to mark transitions.
- ❖ On the sticky note, write each paragraph’s purpose.

Note: You might interpret the structure differently. That’s fine! We’ll compare notes at the end.



Structure is like an accordion that expands or contracts to fit the scope of the project.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1091886>

Reverse Outlining/Narrative Structure

- ❖ Introduction: What's the hook? Who's speaking? What's their voice / why? What makes the reader care?
- ❖ Support / Examples: Every point should add to your idea / narrative. Think about how ideas are ordered and look out for redundancy.
- ❖ Conclusion: A resonant ending echoes ideas from the opening, wraps them up, or broadens the scope to future work / thoughts.

Prompts for 500-750 word short essays:

1. In a personal essay, describe an encounter with a nonhuman (an animal, object, etc.) that changed you.
2. The year is 2040. Write a reminiscence about your childhood winters.
3. “Solastalgia” is a “psychoterratic” neologism. Create and define your own psychoterratic term, either positive or negative.

First draft is due by Wednesday at noon

Defamiliarization

Defamiliarization

In literature and other forms of artistic production: the effect or technique of disrupting the reader's or audience's habitual perception of the world and making familiar elements in a text, play, etc., seem strange and fresh, especially by means of drawing attention to the language or formal devices used. Later also more generally: the fact or process of rendering something unfamiliar.

— *OED*

Defamiliarization

- ❖ Link familiar to unfamiliar
- ❖ Make the familiar strange
- ❖ Make the strange seem ordinary (which makes the ordinary feel strange)

Defamiliarization

How does Elizabeth Bishop apply this technique
in “12 O’Clock News”?

Defamiliarization

Describe an object in 50-75 words in a way that defamiliarizes it. You can come up with your own object (don't name it in your piece) or use one of the following: an ice cream cone, an avocado, a Christmas tree, a doorway, or a bulletin board.

Concision

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

— William Strunk Jr.
in *Elements of Style*

Concision

Look out for:

- ❖ Redundancy
- ❖ Filler words and phrases
- ❖ Phrases that can be simplified to words
- ❖ Exaggeration (although this falls under “precision”)

Concision

Remember:

- ❖ Every part of the text should add something new.
- ❖ Simple \neq Simplistic. Complexity is fine (both vocabulary and sentence structure), but aim for clarity, as well.

Audience

Audience

“Three Versions, Not One Lie” Scenario:

You were mugged last night. The thief took your wallet and laptop but left your phone. You weren't harmed, but the thief had a knife.

Audience

Tell the story of what happened to:

- ❖ a police officer
- ❖ your mother
- ❖ your best friend

One paragraph per listener. No lies.

Audience

Narratives are shaped by the character's identity / perspective, emotional state, *and* audience.

Audience

We adjust which details we include as well as our language and tone based on who's listening.

Audience

Think about a design or research project you've worked on. How would you explain it to a professor vs. a grandparent vs. a friend in a different field?

Write a one-sentence summary for each listener.

How does your word choice change?

Critique

- ❖ For today's critiques, we will split into groups of 4.
- ❖ The person to the right of whoever's work is being critiqued should read the piece aloud. This is so that the person whose work is being critiqued can hear how someone else reads and interprets it.
- ❖ Then for the next 25 minutes, the person whose work is being critiqued may not speak. Instead, listen to how peers interpret the work using the guiding questions on the next slide.
- ❖ Take notes on what peers say — what they understood and where there's a gap between your intention and their understanding. Are there ways to make your work more clear or precise?
- ❖ In the final 5 minutes, ask questions, explain what you were trying to do, and listen to why peers read/understood the work the way they did.

Critique

- ❖ In your own words, what is the author saying?
- ❖ Did you have any questions while reading the piece? Do these questions need to be resolved for you to understand it?
- ❖ What is the structure? How does it support the content? Are there any moments where the through line of the piece can be more clear? Does the narrative make sense? Are any elements out of order?
- ❖ Does every sentence / paragraph add to the overall piece? Is anything redundant or irrelevant?
- ❖ Did any phrases or sentences stand out?
- ❖ Can any sentences or phrases be more precise or clear?
- ❖ Do the style and tone support the content? If the tone or style change, do you understand why?

Mimesis

Mimesis

Imitative representation of the real world in art and literature.

— *OED*

Mimesis

Describe waiting for the train in a way that makes the reader feel like the wait is interminable.

Mimesis

Write a list in a way that overwhelms the reader.

Mimesis

Sentence length can pace the reader.

- ❖ Short sentences slow readers down.
- ❖ Counterintuitively, long sentences read quickly.

Mimesis

Describe a traffic jam. Use sound, rhythm, and sentence length to evoke the experience.

Write.

Then make it right.