end of the beginning, is the *character complication.* It is the point when the main character runs into something that complicates his or her life. The character complication comes where a nutgraf would go in a traditional newspaper narrative and can be interchangeable with it.

The *complication* isn't necessarily a *conflict*; it is merely something that forces the character to exert effort. It is often a conflict in the literature of Western cultures, but less so in the literature of African cultures.

In nearly all stories, the characters go through some transformation. The reporter may have trouble discerning it at first. If it isn't there, the reporter probably doesn't have a story. The key is to find that significant point of change.

My university students often write about people dying of cancer. I encourage this, actually, because too often no one wants to talk to dying people, although they really want to discuss what they are experiencing. My students often assume that the complication of their stories is the cancer. If terminal cancer is the complication, then death must be the ending. So, what's the meaning? That's hard to say.

Let's go back and look at the story again. Maybe the complication is something else. Most people who are dying of cancer receive their diagnosis and are afraid; they deny; they fight. In the end, they make peace with their cancer. The point of insight becomes the conquering of fear, not the diagnosis of cancer. By "point of insight" I mean the moment when the story turns toward the resolution, when the main character (and/or the reader) finally grasps the true nature of the problem and knows what must be done about it. The meaning: There are fates we can't change, but we can deal with them in ways that allow us to retain our dignity and our sense of control.

In most good stories the characters decide their own destinies. In the real world that often doesn't happen. In that way stories are not like real life. Good stories show how people survive.

All stories have three layers. The top layer is what actually happens—the narrative. The next layer is how those events make the main character feel. If the writer succeeds in getting the reader to suspend disbelief and see through the character's eyes, then the character's and the reader's feelings will be joined. There is another layer below the factual and the emotional. It is the rhythm of the piece and evokes the story's universal theme: love endures, wisdom prevails, children mature, war destroys, prejudice perverts.

The preeminent neuroanatomist of the mid-twentieth century,

Paul MacLean, coined the phrase *triune brain.* His idea was that each person has three brains: One understands rhythm, one understands emotion, and the third is cognitive. The cognitive brain is programmable; it speaks English or Chinese or logic. But to really communicate deeply, a writer must use the languages of all three brains. That is why rhythms are so important to storytelling.

Storytelling can be symphonic. John Steinbeck wrote that he wanted *The Grapes of Wrath* to sound like Igor Stravinksy's *Firebird Suite.* Ernest Hemingway was a little more brutal. He chose Bach. If you take the first chapter of *Farewell to Arms* and read it aloud to the first movement of the Brandenburg Concerto, Hemingway's words seem to match the music perfectly.

The narrative writer may choose to speak at these three levels very consciously, but the effect on the reader is usually unconscious. Readers read very fast, seeing none of the layers. They simply feel it, as you feel a highway while traveling over it.

Rhythm exists in story from the sentence level right up to the sectional level. A lot of my writing is in blank verse. You don't need to know the names of the tropes; you just need to listen for them.

Looking at how the human brain developed—to make an extremely long story very short—it evolved to resolve complications. We like stories because we think in stories; it's how we derive meaning from the world. When you read a hard news story about something that interests you, you already know the context. That is to say, you know the narrative behind the piece of news. The human mind looks at the evidence—new information and past experience—and figures out scenarios, possible narratives. This is why structure reveals meaning and why we like stories that have structure.

Summary vs. Dramatic Narrative

JACK HART

Most narrative pieces shift between summary and dramatic narrative. The summary provides the links between scenes, which are usually written in dramatic narrative. Standard news stories are written in summary narrative. But true storytelling requires mastery of dramatic narrative. Traditional journalists, because they have limited experience

with dramatic narrative, often have a tough time distinguishing between the two. One of the reporters at my newspaper, who had been struggling to grasp the distinction between summary and dramatic narrative, finally saw the light. "Aha!" he said. "I get it. You're either *in* story, or you're *out* of story." *Exactly!*

The following chart shows the main distinctions between the two forms:

Summary Narrative	Dramatic Narrative
Emphasizes the abstract	Emphasizes concrete detail
Collapses time	Readers experience action as if it were happening in real time
Employs direct quotes	Employs dialogue, characters talking to one another
Organized topically	Organized scenically
Omniscient point of view	Specific point of view
Writer hovers above the scene	Clear narrative stance Writer is inside the scene
Deals with outcomes rather than process	Deals with process, gives specific description
Higher on the ladder of abstraction	Lower on the ladder of abstraction
Composed of digression, backstory, and explication	Composed of the story's main line of action

Weaving Story and Idea

NICHOLAS LEMANN

Narrative nonfiction that is mere yarn-spinning won't ever rise to greatness. As practitioners of narrative nonfiction, we often seem to lack a full sense of the importance of ideas in our work. We need to develop a common set of techniques for combining ideas and narrative.

Tom Wolfe's anthology *The New Journalism* came out when I was a young lad starting out in journalism. I almost devoured it. Wolfe's wonderful introduction to the book had even more impact on me than the articles he anthologized. His introductory essay challenged the standards for journalistic criticism. At that time the aesthetics of journalism's literary and visual techniques were almost entirely missing from the grim-faced business of media criticism. But here came Wolfe with a joyous, funny, infectiously ambitious idea about the possibilities of journalism as an art form—poised on the brink of supplanting the novel as the richest and most vital form of published writing.

As important as that essay was to me, a couple of points of dissatisfaction with it have rattled around in my mind in the years since. Both relate to the weaving of *story* and *idea* in narrative writing.

First, Wolfe's thrillingly detailed playbook of techniques for new journalism doesn't fully describe what Wolfe does in his own journalistic work. Yes, Wolfe uses status details about dress and decor and accent, nailing everything to precise locations on a socioeconomic map. Yes, he uses set scenes. Yes, he writes from the characters' points of view. Yes, he includes a lot of dialogue. But those things are not all that he does.

He doesn't fully own up to the fact that he is not just a reporter and a narrativist, but also an intellectual. In his last and greatest narrative nonfiction work, *The Right Stuff*, he uses techniques that he doesn't really acknowledge: A master hypothesis drives the entire work, while he proposes constructs and rubrics throughout the book that drive and shape the story.

Wolfe begins the book with an elaborate, hilarious series of scenes about the lives of fighter pilots in the 1950s, establishing the eponymous "right stuff" as a master concept for the work. The "right stuff" is on the idea track. It is absolutely necessary, and it has to come first. Otherwise, you lose the wonderful joke of the early astronauts' humiliation, even as they are being publicly lionized as heroes over being put into space in capsules that they didn't actually pilot. This humiliation—more idea than event—permits the role of the press in the story to be treated as farce, to memorable effect.

In addition to offering us precise status details, Wolfe offers us a wonderful anthropology and psychology of fighter pilots, bureaucrats, politicians, and the press. *The Right Stuff* is an elaborately disguised public policy analysis of a government agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. The book argues that space

travel was probably a mistake, having been undertaken for cultural, political, and publicity reasons—not scientific ones. The subsequent tragedies involving the space shuttles have made Wolfe's analysis seem prescient.

Wolfe, like most other writers who amount to anything, works actively with ideas as well as techniques. It is theoretically possible for long-form narrative journalists to select a topic that has no idea content but is merely—to use the technical term of our profession—*one hell of a damn story*. Even those stories, when rendered exceptionally well, include some larger issue or implication. All those nonfiction narrative books that have subtitles containing the phrase "that changed America" or "that changed the world" commit themselves to advancing a thesis.

My book *The Big Test* has a very precise idea plot. The big question of the book is this: *By creating a newer lead that will be chosen by supposedly scientific and scrupulously fair means, can you then create a group that the rest of society will follow, hence building a harmonious democratic society?* The answer is *no, you can't*. That's the idea plot of the book.

The events of *The Big Test*'s narrative track advance the idea track. The story of California's Proposition 209 on affirmative action puts into play all the elements of the idea track. I was highly conscious of the interplay of the story track and the idea track both as I reported and as I wrote the book. I used little charts and graphs that showed each plot point and the development of the idea that accompanied it. I chose narrative plot points that efficiently advanced the idea plot.

To develop a strong idea track, the writer gains strong command of the material. Ambitious narrative journalists must do literature reviews. This process gets the writer up to speed on the subject and identifies the compass points in the debate. Journalists often argue that the academic literature pertaining to their subjects is incomprehensible and of no use to them or their readers. Our job as journalists, however, is to encounter the unfamiliar and learn to understand it. Understanding academic discourse is just another reporting problem solved the same way we solve all the others: with persistence, by finding guides, and so on.

If the material is incomprehensible, that's good news. A journalist who encounters something interesting—as usually happens in this process—gets to be the first person to tell the nonspecialist world about it.

In the mid-twentieth century, many historians, sociologists, and anthropologists thought of themselves as people who wrote for the general public. They commanded a very large public audience. Over the second half of the twentieth century, academics in those fields

abandoned that role. Their conversations became much more self-directed, technical, and hard for outsiders to understand.

A journalist's literature review can end up completely invisible to the reader. Still, it is an important tool for avoiding a common pitfall: being unconscious of the assumptions, frames of reference, and master narratives that work their way into the writing.

For example, political writers often operate on the assumption that interest groups are a maligned force in politics. In a nonfiction narrative about politics, therefore, the politician who heeds interest groups is a bad guy, while the one who ignores them is a good guy. Why? James Madison didn't think interest groups were so bad. Most political scientists would laugh at the idea that interest groups can be extracted from politics. Writers should at least be aware of arguments against the conventional wisdom before plunging ahead.

Once the writer is fully familiar with the subject, the next step is analogous to matching up the sound track and the visual track while making a movie. The audience notices the novelistic aspects of narrative nonfiction: the movement of the characters through a series of dramatic events in memorable settings. That's the equivalent of a film's visual track. The film's sound track is vitally important and requires elaborate working out. Still, it doesn't entirely penetrate the audience's conscious awareness. The narrative nonfiction equivalent of the film sound track is an *idea plot*: an ordered succession of arguments that moves forward in sync with the narrative plot. The terms from journalism that best convey this process are *signposts, billboards,* and *nutgrafs*. In all these places the writer stops the narrative and signals the meaning or where the narrative is headed next. The more the writer thinks about the movement of the idea track in the narrative *while reporting*, the less clunky the execution.

At a few key places in the narrative there should be what I call "marriage moments," places where the idea track and the narrative track intersect. During a movie scene in which the main character picks up the guitar, the audience becomes much more aware of the sound track because it is temporarily in one-to-one correspondence with the visual track. That is a marriage moment.

In journalism, marriage moments often arise when authority figures make decisions that shape the story's direction. These individuals make their decisions on the basis of material in the idea track. In works of narrative nonfiction, judges, welfare caseworkers, and parole officers often make for good marriage moments.

Marriage moments fasten the idea track more firmly to the narrative track. Narrativists tend to focus heavily on developing their re-

porting and writing capabilities just to spin a dramatic yarn. This is a mistake. The marriage of narrative and analysis is the fundamental project of journalism.

Once you get past the realm of the purely entertaining or sensational, nearly all journalism is a promise to explain the world via narrative. Stories and characters have a powerful hold on the human mind. We translate the world into narrative form. That is why story, rather than datum, is the basic unit of journalism. Purely analytic work or purely narrative work is conceptually cleaner than the blending of the two. Narrative married to idea is complicated, difficult, and somewhat messy. So what? Life is, too. If it weren't, there wouldn't be any need for journalism.

Endings

BRUCE DESILVA

Every story must arrive at a destination; the purpose of a story is to lead your readers to it. The ending is your final chance to nail the point of the story to the readers' memory so it will echo there for days. Among those who write for a living, newspaper writers are the only ones who do not seem to understand this fact.

Screenwriters know that if a movie doesn't have a good ending, people will leave the theater feeling like they wasted their money. Novelists know that you can't write a good book without a good ending. Speechwriters always try to end on a high note. And everyone knows that when you write a love letter or a letter asking for a raise or a letter of complaint to the phone company, the tone and substance of the last line is crucial.

But most newspaper stories dribble pitifully to an end. This is the enduring legacy of the inverted pyramid—a form that makes good endings impossible. The inverted pyramid orders information from most important to least important, robbing stories of their drama and leaving nothing to reward readers who stay with it to the last line.

It is important to recognize that the inverted pyramid never had anything to do with writing or readers or the news. Those of us who have studied the history of the form trace its emergence to the invention of the telegraph. Reporters covering far-flung news about, say, a

sinking ship or a Civil War battle now had a speedy way to transmit their stories to their newspapers, but they found that they could not always rely on it. Sometimes the line would fail; sometimes their messages would be preempted by urgent official business. So they learned to transmit their information in bursts, with the most important facts first.

This proved to be the perfect form to accommodate the manufacturing process in every newspaper's back shop. Stories were written and edited on paper and then sent to typographers, who set them in lead type. This type had to fit into a designated space on a newspaper page, but often it was too long. The only practical way to cut lead type was to trim it from the bottom.

We don't send our stories by telegraph anymore, and it has been more than thirty years since U.S. newspapers used lead type. Today, most are fully digital, so stories can be trimmed anywhere with the stroke of a key. Furthermore, stories for online use don't have to be trimmed to fit a preexisting hole at all. The only appropriate use for the inverted pyramid today is briefs, but old habits die hard. The best journalists know this, but the form persists. Many editors still routinely cut from the bottom. If you are stuck with such an editor, keep writing good endings while you look for another job.

Your ending must do four things: signal to the reader that the piece is over, reinforce your central point, resonate in your reader's mind after he or she has turned the page, and arrive on time. The very best endings often do something else: They offer a twist that readers don't see coming but that nevertheless strikes them as exactly right.

There are many ways to do this well. A good ending can be

- a vividly drawn scene
- a memorable anecdote that clarifies the main point of the story
- a telling detail that symbolizes something larger than itself or suggests how the story might move forward into the future
- a compellingly crafted conclusion in which the writer addresses the reader directly and says, "This is my point."

Sometimes you may want to bring the story full circle, ending with an idea or words echoing the beginning. Symmetry appeals to readers. Occasionally, you may want to end with a quote that is superbly put, but don't do this often. After all, you are the writer; you should be able to say it better. It's *your* story; why give the last word to someone else?

This advice applies to all stories, but narrative writing has an additional requirement. Every narrative tale—from *The Iliad* to the latest Pulitzer Prize–winning newspaper serial—has the same underlying structure you have read about elsewhere in this book: A central character encounters a problem, struggles with it, and, in the end, overcomes it or is defeated by it or is changed in some way. If the story, as it unfolds in life, lacks one of these elements, you should not attempt to write it as a narrative.

In narrative, the resolution of the problem is your ending. Once you arrive at it, find the nearest exit. Readers devour narratives to discover how the problem will be resolved. Once they know, they stop reading—so you had better stop writing.

Here are some examples of effective endings from stories written by Associated Press reporters.

At the beginning of "What Price the News?" a first-person story by Ian Stewart, he is drifting in and out of consciousness. Something terrible has happened to him, but he doesn't know what. Ian had been shot in the head and his friend killed covering the war in Sierra Leone. The story follows Ian as he struggles to understand what happened and to overcome this terrible injury. It also explores the macho world of foreign correspondents and the importance of getting news of remote wars to the public. But Ian ends his story this way:

> Miles, David and I were naïve to hope our reporting could make people care about a little war in Africa. In fact, Freetown might never have made your daily newspaper had it not been for the death of one Western journalist and wounding of another. Will I continue to work as a journalist when I am well enough? Yes. And most likely I'll go back overseas. Will I risk my life for a story again? No, not even if the world cares the next time.

This ending works because you don't see it coming, and yet at the same time you realize: Of *course* this is how he feels.

In "A Town Is Born," Ted Anthony describes how the denizens of an unincorporated patch of New Mexican desert go about forming a local government. Near the beginning he presents readers with a nutgraf: "In a few hours they would become fathers. The new arrival would be rambunctious, assertive and self-determined, ready to make the kind of glorious mess that only democracy can."

The bulk of the story is details: How much land should be included in the town? How should they set the tax rate? Do they need a road grader? At the end, Ted nails his point home this way:

> For now, they're simply crafting their own community: negotiating workaday squabbles, liking and disliking each other, dealing with constituents, hop scotching forward, and doing it themselves. Everything is theirs, even the mistakes. Big ideas on a small canvas, laws in action. People deciding together how they want life to be. The glorious mess that is American democracy, alive and kicking, just off Interstate 40 on a plateau under the vast New Mexico sky.

Here, Ted directly tells the reader the story's point. He also pulls the camera back, away from the tight shots of the road grader and the tax rate. Suddenly, you're on a plateau under the vast sky, viewing the historical and constitutional context in which this story unfolds.

In "Mysterious Killer," Matt Crenson and Joseph P. Verrengia chronicle New York City's 1999 West Nile epidemic. The story begins with dead birds mysteriously falling out of trees. Before long, human beings are dying, too. Epidemiologists race to discover the cause. By the end of the story they've identified the exotic virus carried by mosquitoes breeding in kiddie pools, birdbaths, and abandoned tires. And suddenly the outbreak stops, not because of human action but because the mosquito season ends. The story concludes this way:

> In the New York City neighborhood where it all began, barbecues and kiddie pools have been put away for the season, and many of the old tires have been carted away. But here and there, tires missed during the cleanup, or discarded since, lay in the grass, ready to become mosquito nurseries with the first spring rain.

The ending is an ominous peek into the future. Think of it as the Godzilla ending: The monster has been destroyed, everyone is celebrating, and then the camera pans to the monster's egg at the bottom of the sea.

For a story called "In Case We Die," Tim Sullivan and Raf Casert traveled to Conakry, Guinea, and Brussels, Belgium, to re-create the lives of two fourteen-year-old boys who died in the wheel well of a jet airplane during a desperate attempt to escape the poverty of their

country. On one of their bodies Belgian authorities found an envelope bearing the words: "In case we die." Inside was an eloquent plea for the world to help the children of Africa.

Tim and Raf described the boys' lives in Africa, their plans to escape, their ill-fated journey, and the outpouring of emotion their case initially caused in Belgium, a country still torn with guilt about its colonial past. They ended the tale this way:

> Now the boys' letter rests inside dossier number 4693.123506/99 of the Belgian State Judiciary. And on another continent in a public cemetery, two graves ten feet apart mark the end of the journey for two boys who had a message for the world. The small mounds of dirt in the Conakry graveyard are edged with rocks and rotting chunks of palm trees. Staked to each grave is a small metal marker. Both are blank.

This is not the ending we would have hoped for. We would have wanted these boys' deaths to have meant something. But in the end, the boys are forgotten, the poignant point made starkly with two small details: the letter filed away in the bowls of a bureaucracy and the unmarked graves.

In "God and Country," Richard Ostling and Julia Lieblich explain why the same conflicts over church and state go on generation after generation in America. The piece, datelined Ecru, Mississippi, starts this way:

> Long after the high school football game ended, Lisa Herdahl and Pat Mounce sat on wet bleachers talking intently under a shared umbrella. The two 36-year-old mothers were discussing something they cared deeply about: the prayers broadcast over the intercom of their children's schools in the Pontotoc School District. Herdahl opposed the prayers and was taking the county's school district to court. Mounce had organized the town to fight back.

The story explores the enduring debate over the sixteen words about freedom of religion in the U.S. Constitution. It is a story of conflict—until the very end:

> Americans disagree, and perhaps always will, over matters of church and state. But the debate is never over the fundamental right to religious freedom embodied in those 16 words from two centuries ago. What Americans argue about is how best to practice it. Unlike so many people throughout the world even today, Americans do not settle their religious differences with blood. They debate them in legislative chambers and mannered courtrooms, or even while sharing an umbrella.

The story takes an unexpected turn as the writers suddenly pull back, putting the debate in a global context. They accomplish this by returning to the umbrella, a metaphor for the Constitution that shelters Americans from violent religious strife.

One final piece of advice: When your story is a narrative, write the ending first. Remember, the ending is your destination. It is a lot easier to write the rest of the piece when you already know where you are going.