CHAPTER 8: NARRATION - STORIES THAT CREATE MEANING

This chapter emphasizes connections between critical thinking and narrative. It maps important skills for reading and creating narratives:

- Identifying key features of narratives
- Recognizing that a narrative's sequences are selected and organized by a narrator who has specific values, beliefs, knowledge, and biases
- Consciously choosing what to include and what to exclude from a narrative
- Using narratives for persuasive purposes

You walk into the kitchen, throw your keys on the table, and say to your mother, "You won't believe what happened." Like a good tennis partner, she returns the conversational ball and asks you what happened. Your answer is dramatic: you were in a hurry to school; a train made you late; you sped; the police stopped you; you could not find your car registration; you sat there and softly hit your head against the steering wheel in frustration; the officer was sympathetic; she let you off with a warning; you went to class; the professor himself was late; your tardiness did not matter. By presenting the events as a story -- as a narrative -- you have made the experience well-organized and understandable. You had other options such as placing the police officer's written warning on the table or bursting into tears, but your choice was to tell a story. Telling stories is probably the most basic tool we have for explaining events, and it is important to know how to recognize narratives and how to create them.

So, what is it that makes a narrative . . . a narrative? The most obvious answer is that narratives create *sequences of events.* The events are organized *chronologically*, and your reader/listener uses the sequence to connect the events into a larger *meaning*.

KEY FEATURES OF NARRATIVE

At this point, you may be asking a reasonable question: "Why does narrative matter? Why does narrative matter if I'm a chemist, a nurse, a tool and die maker, a doctor, or a police officer?" That is an exceptionally good question, and here is a partial answer: many things are actually narratives, but they hide the fact that they are stories. For example, think about a lab report in a chemistry class. The report is really a story about the sequence of events in the lab. If you were given oxygen and hydrogen and the tools for combining them, your report would give the *setting* (the lab, the equipment, the materials), the *action* (combining the elements), the *climax* (the formation of the

Where in Your world are Narratives?

Narration is the most basic mode for communication. Stories are efficient, effective tools for sharing insights.

Narrative in Daily Life

- We follow and create narratives when we play video games
- We follow narratives on film and television
- We use narrative conversations to build intimacy and relationships

Narrative at School

- We use narratives when we write scientific reports
- We use the narratives of syllabi to foresee the future of a class
- We use narrative in college applications to present our achievements over time

Narrative at Work

- Medical charts are narratives of what is happening to a patient
- Employee reviews tell the story of past accomplishments
- An insurance company uses an accident report to reconstruct the story of a collision

new molecule), the *falling action* (measurements of quantities and ratios), and finally the *resolution* (the identification of the new molecule as H_2O). The final portion of the report would give the reader the meaning of the whole sequence. Your work as a scientist relies on narration. It is the way that humans tend to present their experience to others.

Here are the key concepts about narration so far:

1. General Features of Narratives
    a. Emphasize sequence of events and actions
    b. Organized chronologically
    c. Offer a meaning for the story
2. Organizational Features
    a. Setting
    b. Rising Action
    c. Climax
    d. Falling Action
    e. Resolution

What are key terms that often tell you that a document relies on narration?

first/second/third/etc.	next	previously	then
later	after	before	earlier
afterward	until	while	soon
during	meanwhile	when	thus

These and similar words establish sequences, and most involve sequences in time.

When you tell someone a story, you put things in a sequence, ignore irrelevant materials, and select what is most important to your goal. When the story is all finished, you provide an answer to the "So what?" that your reader asks about the narrative. Because you create the narrative, it is fairly obvious to *you* what is being ignored. (Did you tell your mother that when your professor came in late, he handed you a test with a "D" on it?) Thus, creating a narrative can be fairly straightforward. You are making the choices. On the other hand, when you read a narrative, the choices are much harder to recognize.

RECOGNIZING NARRATION

We began with a simple definition of narration: a narrative is a story that uses sequence and chronology to connect events in a way that leads to a meaning, a moral, an idea, or a discovery. We have made a list of words that create time-based sequences. Using this first draft of our definition, we can see that "Little Red Riding Hood" is a narrative about a little girl who goes out into the woods, talks to strangers, and nearly dies. It seems to serve as a warning against strangers. The story has a sequence of events that teach a lesson.

A partial list of examples of narratives includes police reports, medical histories, lab reports, novels, short stories, plays, urban legends, television sitcoms, soap operas, history books, genre films (westerns, romances, mysteries), biographies, and autobiographies. We can call these narratives when they use -- as they often do -- sequences of events that use time as a primary organizational strategy, but also use setting, characters, action, and resolution to convey a message.

Not only do narratives use time and sequence, but also they have a *narrator* who is important to the story's meaning. This narrator is sometimes unnamed and sometimes almost invisible. It is the voice that chooses the events and chooses how to organize them, gives them emphasis, and who offers the final "meaning" to the story. Readers need to be careful not to confuse the narrator and the author. Authors create different types of narrators just as they create different types of characters. These choices are never neutral, and by mapping them, we find out about the narrative's values and beliefs. We see the narrative's hidden agendas, its unacknowledged assumptions, and its place in the network of similar ideas.

Narration is a double-edged sword: it puts things into a particular kind of order, but it also excludes some things. When we consciously recognize both the included and the excluded material, we become better readers and better writers. Identifying the gaps in the existing map of a subject requires that we think about the narrator and about what is excluded from the story.

If we are going to *write* well, we have to *read* with a keen eye for how a narrative is being put together. This chapter helps you master two basic skills: 1) writing narratives, and 2)

recognizing how narratives are created and how they offer us meaning. Thus, you will sharpen your ability to read narratives so that you can create narratives, and you will sharpen your ability to create narratives so you can read with greater insight and skepticism. It is a two-way street between reading and writing, and the road between them lets you critically explore the world around you.

IDENTIFYING NARRATORS

Stories are always told by someone. Sometimes, these narrators are truthful; other times, they are unreliable, or ignorant. In some other cases we never directly hear the narrator's voice, but we can figure out the kind of person who would tell such a story. Understanding the narrator is as important as the story itself.

Persona is the Greek word for "mask," and it can refer to the large masks that an actor put on when playing a role in a play in ancient Greece. These plays were serious events, and when actors put on the persona, they were transformed into the character. They "became" Oedipus or Creon or Antigone or whoever was the character. When your teachers read your work -- or when your employer reads your work -- they put on a reading persona. It is much different from the other roles they play in life. You have to write for that persona. Here are a few key features of the teacher's Grading Persona:

- The grading persona takes you at your word, your *written* word. If you write, "Going down the street, the school looked beautiful," the reading persona says, "Hey, that's weird. How could a building go down the street? This person is telling me something that sounds mistaken." Of course, that very same reader in her/his role as a teacher or

employer actually knows what you mean. But in written work, you are assumed to have written exactly what you mean.

- The grading persona already knows the existing map to which you are responding or making an addition. On the other hand, the grading persona expects that you will help them out understanding the existing map to which your paper responds. A writer cannot start in the middle of a discussion. Background information and context matter.

Not only does your instructor have a persona, but you must have an appropriate writing persona as well. Narratives are especially dependent on the ability to create appropriate narrators who understand their relationship to the reader.

Putting Narration to Work

Here is a real email (slightly altered to protect the guilty) that embodies ideas about the writer's relationship to the reader:

Miss. R___:

I missed class on Friday cuz my favorite cousin was here from Georgia and we just had to party, you know! Anyhoo, did I miss anything important? I been looking for the book the Yellow wallpaper and can't find it. Who wrote it anyway?

What does the writer assume about her/his relationship to the reader? How do you know this? Is the assumed relationship appropriate? How could the email be revised once the relationship is understood differently?

THREE EXAMPLES OF NARRATION

Below are examples of narrations. The examples range from the work of an inexperienced first-term writer to the work of a famous scientist. Each example illustrates key features about narration.

Example #1

The first example of a narrative was produced by a student in a first term-class. It is an early first draft of what eventually became a much better narrative. As is, it is not an effective narrative. The notes in the margins not only point out what makes it a narrative, but also point out some of the missed opportunities to make it a better example.

Learning to Ride a Bike	
This narrative is about the time I learned to ride a bike. I was seven years old. I got a bike for my birthday. But I didn't know how to ride it. My dad took me outside on the driveway to practice riding. My dad held the back of the bike so I wouldn't fall. We did that for a long time. When we went down the driveway one time, my dad tripped and let go of the bike and I drove into the street. Luckily, there was no cars coming. My dad broke his arm and couldn't teach me anymore how to ride my bike. I went to the hospital with him and my mom and the nurse gave me a piece of candy. My dad said his arm hurt real bad, and they put a cast on it. He let me sign it when we got home. And that's the story of how I rode my new bike.	The first sentence is about the paper, not about riding a bike. It only repeats the information in the title. The use of "I" creates a narrator, and the narrator provides a setting and rising action (his father running behind the bicycle). There is a climax (the father falls as the narrator rides away). The story's falling action (the trip to the hospital) concludes with a resolution (the candy, signing the cast). The writer organizes the story in a time-based sequence. It is accurate to call this a narrative although it lacks a key element: an answer to the reader's question about why the writer tells the story.

What does this example tell us about narration?

There is nothing "wrong" with what the student wrote. It is a narrative, and it shows familiarity with basic concepts about narration (time, sequence, setting, action, resolution). How is it different from what an experienced writer would produce? First, the writer uses very short sentences that need to have stronger connections (transitions) between them. The story carries the reader forward in a jolting, jerky narrative ride that needs to be smoothed out. If this is a problem that affects your writing, you should go to the handbook in the back and look up "transitions." There is practical advice on how to create strong ones. You might also review the pages about "types of sentences" in the Sentences chapter because they create transitions.

This narrative *attempts* to solve problems, but it does so in awkward ways. It can be improved by using transitions, and by dealing with the "So what?" that readers will ask.

This writer is not really sure who s/he is writing for. Is it the teacher? The class? Someone else? There is a good possibility that the student needs to think about the audience. If the audience is the teacher, then the student needs to ask, "The teacher in the role of what?" Is the paper for the teacher in her/his role as the person who is in front of the class, helping understand assignments and concepts? Or is it the teacher in her/his role as a father, mother, aunt, uncle, motorcycle racer, quilter, or whatever else s/he does? Or -- and this is the better question -- is it *the teacher in her/his role as a paper grader*?

You will help yourself if you think a bit more about this role played by your teacher.

Example #2:

Like the first example, the one below was produced by a student in a first-term class. The writer seems to know useful techniques for building transitions: repetitions, repetitions with difference, intervening sentences that comment on previous information. Pay attention to how the writer creates a smoother flow of time and events in this example. At the end, the story explicitly names the reason for having told the story.

How To Be a Model Citizen

When I was **in third grade**, my friend Tom and I really liked to play with Play-Doh modeling clay. It came in so many bright colors, and we made animals to create our own zoo; we pretended we were on a safari hunting lions and tigers with our Play-Doh rifles, and we crafted the dream cars we intended to have when we were older. Like every other kid, we really liked the smell of Play-Doh, that distinctive, slightly sweet bread dough scent it has. But for us, that was only a small part of the pleasure of Play-Doh. That is, **until** my sister got the Play-Doh Meal Makin' Kitchen Playset for her birthday. It had molds for making all different kinds of food; it also came with a little plastic stove, a toaster, and a pizza pan. However, the best part was the recipe book. It told us how to mix certain colors to make the food look realistic, and suggested shapes **we could make** in addition to the molds of chicken legs and ham to create a whole meal. In my mind, **I can still see** the plastic frying pan that we filled with real-looking fried eggs, the vivid yellow yolk resting on the whites, and four pieces of tasty bacon on the side. **We added** two slices of golden brown toast, with red Play-Doh standing in for raspberry jelly. **The more we played**, the more creative we got. We made a pizza with everything, a hamburger and French fries, and even used the molds to bake an elaborate birthday cake decorated with every color in the spectrum. **After a while**, I started to get hungry, and I know Tom did too, because he asked me, "**Do you think we could really eat** this stuff? It smells pretty good to me." I wasn't really sure, but it seemed like it was **worth a try**, especially since we **had been looking at food all morning.** But I still had some reservations about it, so I said, "**Let's see if** Jake will eat it! If he likes it, it'll be okay for us to try." Jake was my basset hound, and he would eat anything. He always seemed to be hungry; even right after eating his dog food, he would be at the dinner table, begging for something off my plate. So I called him over, and **after** a brief discussion on the merits of bacon over steak, we offered him the pan of bacon and eggs, complete with toast. **As we expected**, he swallowed the whole thing in two gulps. He looked a little surprised, probably because of the unfamiliar taste, and walked into the kitchen to get a drink of water. He drank quite a lot of water, in fact, and **headed toward** the living room, where he sat down and started making wheezing noises like I had never heard. Tom and I looked at each other with alarm, **but before we could decide what to do next**, Jake threw up noisily, spewing a gruesome rainbow across the living room carpet. There was no chance that my mom would not find out about this, so after Tom left, I found her in the laundry room and sheepishly confessed my crime. Jake spent the night at the veterinarian's office, I was grounded for the weekend, and Tom and I learned a valuable lesson – just because something smells good and looks appetizing, it doesn't necessarily mean it's a good idea to eat it.

Notice the bolded words that create a sequence of events: when, after, and before. The writer connects the set of events with transitional events that connect to create a long story. The story has all the usual elements: characters, a narrator, rising action, a climax, falling action, and a resolution. The lack of paragraphs makes it difficult to recognize the story's sequential structure.
Note also that the story leads to a "moral" or a more general insight (blue print). This narrative is tightly organized and represents all the key features of narration.

What does this example tell us about narration?

The student provides the kind of linked details that create the narrative flow. They suggest that this student reads more than the first student and has a more automatic sense of what builds a story. S/he also knows how to create what is called "pacing" in the story. For example, after the dog eats the Play-Doh, there is a description within the narrative that focuses on the dog's "surprised" look, the way he walks around, how he drinks water, and his "wheezing." The writer slows down the narration in order to create a bit of suspense. The reader gets a few moments to ask, "Hey, what's going to happen to the dog?" Even though it is a logical question from the moment the dog eats the clay, the writer creates "reading time" where the suspense lingers. The narrative illustrates how a simple event can be shaped into narrative through an understanding of how narration works.

What we have looked at so far pushes you to think about what readers need to understand about your information and about the choices that go into building a narration.

Example #3:

The example below uses the work of James, a Brazilian student studying in the United States. James is a whiz at math, a voracious reader, and fluent in English. However, his writing is less natural. The steps he goes through as he writes a letter for a scholarship are the same steps you would use to write a letter.

Looking for Anomalies, Asking Questions, and Identifying Opportunities

James begins with an email to a professor who has sent him a list of scholarships available to foreign students:

> Dear Professor Doe,
>
> You are a big help to me. I appreciate this list, and I will write the letter right away. I have many questions: 1.Should I try to play down the fact that I am from Brazil? 2. Am I just telling them a list of my grades and my other facts? 3.Will they care about my family and what I did in Brazil that makes me want to be in another culture? I ask these questions because they only ask two general questions to guide the essay: "Career and Educational Goals," and "Activities, clubs, community service, and other activities that represent your sustained interests." These do not seem like questions.
>
> Your student, James M_____

James' note shows that he wants to map the territory. He asks for information about his readers: do they have biases about foreigners; does the story of his education matter; and do they want a list or a story? Without using the term "mapping the territory," James is doing exactly that. He is asking about whether or not to use narration, and he is trying to figure out what he should put into the narration and what he should leave out of the narration in order to create the meaning he seeks.

James also knows that he has another audience: the professor to whom he sends the email. He addresses the professor formally, writes in complete sentences, and concludes with a closing and his full name. In fact, his email looks more like a letter than most emails. It is a choice that signals the importance of his request. Let's look at the email answer he receives.

> Hi James -- Good questions. First, it's a good moment in history to be Brazilian. Everyone recognizes that China, India, and Brazil are the new economic giants in the world economy; thus, your nationality seems an advantage. Of course, you're right to think about it because there are so many unemployed citizens here, and there's a bias against them. Thus, your nationality is a durable fact, and you must treat it as a valuable asset. It's valuable to you, and it ought to be valuable to the college, and to this country. But remember that "ought to be" and "is" mean very different things. In order to remind the committee that you're human, friendly, smart, disciplined, etc., you should probably respond in terms of a narrative (a story). Select key events and achievements that illustrate your commitment to learning. Don't apologize; tell your story as a story about someone who is bringing a new, unexpected richness to the culture.
>
> Here's what I haven't heard from you: what is it that you "are" or "have" that nobody has talked about? You need to show that there's an unrecognized need for whatever it is that you represent, and thus you're valuable. Send me a draft, and I'll try to be helpful.
>
> Yours,
> J. Doe

The professor is more casual than James. There is no formal opening, and he addresses the student by first name. This may seem minor, but it is part of the social code that bespeaks the greater relative power and authority of the professor. Also note that the professor explicitly says that a specific rhetorical mode -- narration -- should govern the letter. The rough draft and the comments from the teacher embody the mapping metaphors we use to think about writing:

Using the Purpose and Problem Statement

James writes yet another email before he goes to work on his letter. It is brief, and it exemplifies that identifying the gaps in the map is a vital step toward effective writing.

> Professor --I do not want to be rude or to brag, but if I am from an emerging economy and America is trying to connect to Brazil, wouldn't peoples like me be useful? Can I say this? Do the committee think about such things? May I point out this fact?
>
> James

James specifically asks about the map that Americans use to think about immigrants, the economy, international relations, and a host of other questions. James has identified a gap in the map, and now it is his job to re-draw that map in a letter.

Organizing the Draft With a Prospectus

James begins to re-draw the map by writing a note that explains what he intends to do and to accomplish. Such a planning note is often called a "prospectus." Here is the email to which he attached the first draft of his letter:

> Dear Professor -- I have thought about what to say, but I am still not sure how to say it. I will tell about that I have always been a good student and that my family supports me in this. I will tell about going to English school when I was little and about my good grades in college. I think they need to know that I was an exchange student. Maybe that will be help. I have decided that I must say that all these things help both America and Brazil and that I need a scholarship to stay here.
>
> James

Developing the Prospectus into a Rough Draft

James is ready to turn his prospectus into a rough draft. He has performed all the essential tasks that lead to a complete document. He has mapped the territory in detail by reviewing everything from the place of immigrants in America to the emerging relationship between Brazil and the United States. He has mapped the probable beliefs of the scholarship committee. After he completed his map of existing knowledge, he identified an un-named gap in it. This gap is the place for his own voice in the worlds of the letter, the college, the country, and the

world. That may seem to overstate his insight, but he has re-drawn these maps to see his own place on it. Here is his first draft along with the notes from his professor:

James M_____ 2010 Linden Hometown, MI 48823 (555) 777-7777 jamesm@email.zzz	You recognize that the letter should be formal, and your inside address reflects this (good!). Did you know that a formal letter also includes the address of those to whom you write? Including your email address is a good idea. Perhaps it could be placed at the end, beneath your name and after your telephone number.
Dear Scholarship Committee:	

To gain knowledge by successfully interfacing the cultures I have been exposed to, is the motto which guides my life recently. **Since** I started Elementary School in my home country (Brazil), education was a major concern to me; because of my independence nature, tracing long term achievements was a process that occurred precociously. My interest in the architecture of different cultures was easily identified by people who surrounded my **childhood**; as a consequence of the social exposure I was under, my parents saw the necessity to introduce me to the international field under practical and affordable ways. Needless to say, my family has been an important player in the guidelines of my education. **The first step** we took, in order to achieve the goal of international familiarity, was to matriculate me in a private English course, **when** I was 10 years old. Along with experiences such as entering an Exchange Student Program between Brazil and America, and participating in numerous events that promoted international integration, I developed a sophisticated sense of maturity, and **became able** to make my own critical decisions regarding following my aspirations. My actual goal is to obtain a Bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering by merging my experiences in the international field with my designs. Such a choice is also based on my educational background in Brazil and my scholastic excel in Mathematics.	I will mark in BLUE the phrases that sound a bit "unnatural." Your opening line establishes a general theme for the story you're about tell, but it sounds a bit stiff . . . perhaps not what a native speaker would use, especially the term "interfacing." Use your usual excellent manner of speaking. I've read the entire letter, and while you want to present your Brazilian nationality as an advantage, you also need to sound comfortable in American culture. I'd also note that you're using a narrative that begins with your early childhood experience, the values of your family, and the development of your goals. The narration helps you define yourself, and the chronological sequence is a useful one. I highlight in bolded text the words that show you're telling a story about the evolution of your interests. You're telling a story. Make the links between events more clear. note: are you using a thesaurus to try and sound more sophisticated? It seems to me that you are, and it's not working. Again, use the vocabulary of your regular speech.

To be part of a selected group of bilingual people seems to have affected my initial choices regarding my academic programs. The fascination to world cultures was camouflaged within a sudden interest to explore areas such as International Business and International Affairs. However, after evaluating experiences with business-related courses that were taken by me, it is clear that the instability of this field is not really appreciative in my point of view. Instead **aiming my long term goals** towards the Business department, my future decisions are based on gradually achieving short term goals, still maintaining my interest in the relationship Brazil x America, and making good use of my Math and Design skills. Some **examples of the short term goals, which I reached so far,** are my membership within Phi Theta Kappa (Honor Society of Macomb Community College) and consequent election to the position of Vice-President of Scholarship, and to have my name on Macomb Community College Dean's List.	You begin with a setting that presents the nature of your interests, and then you explain how that changes. Again, it's a sequence, a story of your growth and development. Again, you wisely choose to tell the story of your evolving interests. Perhaps you will read this aloud to me or to a friend. Your spoken English is flawless, and I'd like you to hear how your written English is a bit different from the way you speak. We need to carry over the naturalness of your speech to your writing.
Another peer to my success transcends from my own experiences; this peer is determination. I believe that the cross cultural relations developed by dealing with people from different nationalities, don't simply promote an exchange of social and language skills, but enforces more valuable factors, such as enlarging our range of knowledge and embracing our ambition to win. To have the opportunity to develop my individual knowledge, and assist to the enlargement of knowledge of people from different nationalities is the crucial point of pursuing a self-significant career.	The promise in the previous paragraph to provide e

I strongly aspire to keep taking more steps toward obtaining a credible educational degree in the United States. Hopefully, by obtaining financial assistance from private scholarships, I will be able to expand the opportunity door for an even more enlightened future.	You conclude your letter with an answer to the "So what?" that the readers will ask after reading your narrative. That is good, and it solidifies the sense that you're using a narrative to communicate. Remember to use a closing, e.g., "Yours truly," followed by a space for your signature and then your named typed underneath.

The instructor's notes on James' letter make some uncomfortable points: James does not sound natural; the story itself is garbled. Because James needs the scholarship, and because he has the ability to hear this criticism as *about the writing, not about him,* he is able to make a major revision.

Bridging the gap between the rough and the submission drafts

James intuitively understands that the professor's responses do not come from a person he knows, but rather from the *grading persona* that the instructor dons to respond to his drafts. James writes several more versions of the letter, and has two friends read it to catch the phrases that do not sound natural. Then he sends his professor what he believes is the final version:

1672 Linden
Hometown, MI 99999
(555) 777-777
Scholarship Committee

Local Community College
666 Salem Street
Hometown, MI 99999
16 June 1904

Dear Scholarship Committee:
I am fortunate to live "between" two cultures. Even as a child in Brazil, I wanted to be independent, and my family encouraged me to find the kind of education that would help me know about other places. My interest in the architecture of different cultures was easily identified by people who surrounded my childhood; as a consequence of this social exposure, my parents saw the necessity to introduce me to the international field in practical and affordable ways. Needless to say, my family has been an important player in the guidelines of my education. The first step we took, in order to achieve the goal of international familiarity, was to enroll me in a private English course, when I was ten years

old. Along with experiences such as entering an Exchange Student Program between Brazil and America in Macomb County, and participating in events that promoted international integration, I developed a strong sense of cultural differences, and became able to make my own critical decisions regarding my aspirations. Now, my actual goal is to obtain a Bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering by merging my experiences as Brazilian-American with my love for mathematics and engineering.

To be part of a selected group of bilingual people seems to have affected my initial choices regarding my academic program. When I began my education, my fascination with world cultures was camouflaged within an interest to explore areas such as International Business and International Affairs. However, after evaluating my experiences with business related courses, it is clear that the field does not fit with my interests. Instead of aiming my long-term goals toward business, my future decisions are based on gradually achieving short-term goals, still maintaining my interest in the relationship between Brazil and America, and making good use of my math and design skills. Some examples of the short term, which I have reached so far, are my membership within Phi Theta Kappa (Honor Society of Macomb Community College) and subsequent election to the position of Vice-President of Scholarship, and to have my name on Macomb Community College Dean's List. As a college student in Brazil, I had 18 credits of "A" work, and here at Macomb, I maintain a 4.0 average. Part of my motivation is the desire to connect two worlds within which I've grown up.

Another part of my success comes from my determination. I believe that the cross cultural experiences developed by dealing with people from different nationalities, don't simply promote an exchange of social and language skills, but also strengthen more valuable factors, such as enlarging our range of knowledge and embracing our ambition to succeed. To have the opportunity to develop my individual knowledge, and assist to the enlargement of knowledge of people from different nationalities is the crucial point of pursuing an education.

I hope to keep taking more steps toward an international life by obtaining a credible educational degree in the United States. Hopefully, by obtaining financial assistance from private scholarships, I will be able to realize this opportunity.

Yours truly,
James M_____
(555) 777-777
jamesM@email.com

Here, James has used narration as the strategy for a scholarship application. Some paragraphs are heavily narrative. Others are still list-like and need to be re-written to develop the story of his growth as a student. The subsequent development of this letter required transforming more

of it into a narrative. He used carefully constructed statements of meaning to conclude each narrative section.

The Submission Draft

Surprise! The final draft of James' letter is not included here because its final stage requires only a few basic changes, changes that you are capable of producing. Rather than simply showing you the letter he submitted, we suggest an exercise: select the least successful of James' paragraphs, and re-write it by applying what you have learned about narration. This exercise requires you to read in a particular fashion, and then it requires you to apply your understanding of narration. It will help you write your own letter.

And here is the good news: James was awarded a scholarship for his tuition.

Putting Narrative to Work

So far, you have read narratives and identified their key words, phrases, and writing techniques. You have discovered the existing map of the idea of narration, and it is likely that this map has raised some good questions. At first, narration seemed very simple, but it has become more complicated. Below are questions that students ask about narration to identify the gaps in what has been said about narration. These questions are steps toward a paper because the gaps prod the students to think about what could be said. To practice this kind of thinking, your job is to write a brief paragraph with *your* answer to each question. See the response to question #2 as a model for what you can create.

Five Student Questions

1. Does a narrative have to be chronological; can the order be shuffled? I happen to watch films like *Inception, Memento, Run Lola Run, Pulp Fiction, The Usual Suspects, Big Fish,* and some of the older TV shows like *Lost.* If the order is cut up, is it still a narrative?

2. So far, we have talked about sequence and about time as key features of a narrative. What are some words that serve as tip-offs that a document is using sequence, time,

and answers to the "So what?" that would make it a narrative? [Note that the answer below is a model, not a real answer written by a student.]

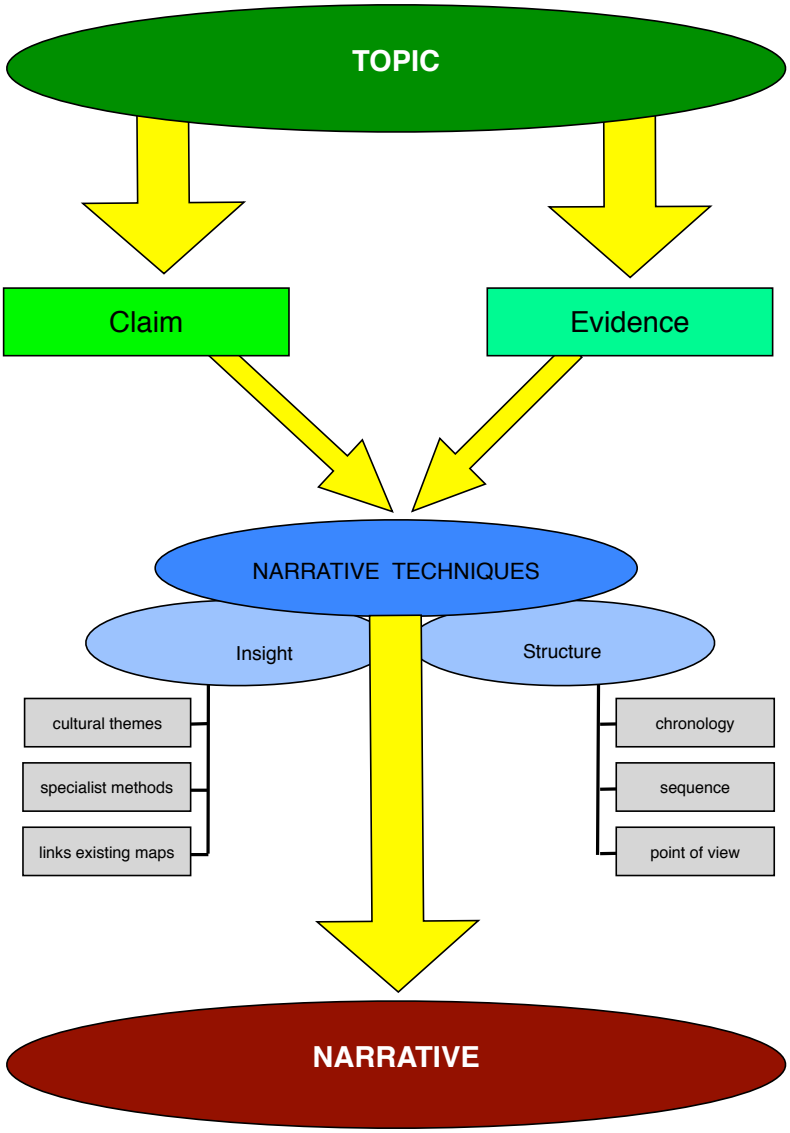
Example: Model Answer	Teacher Response
We already have a list of "time" words used to show sequences, and those are worth reviewing. I've also noticed that there's a strict use of past, present, or future in narration. I think that might be part of creating realistic stories. Maybe it's part of any writing, but in a narrative, the reader needs to know *when* the action is taking place. Transitions seem to be part of storytelling. The use of what the handbook calls "transitions" seems to be part of making the story a continuous event rather than a set of separate, one-after-the-other events. So, I suppose continuity is part of narratives. By the way, the picture of the guy jumping now makes sense to me because films are a bunch of separate images that *seem* to be continuous. Narration might be the same way. It makes me wonder if it's a more general "thing" than a description such as I'd find in a manual for repairing something. I'm used to having my "so what" as a thesis statement in the first paragraph, and I look for it in a narrative, but now I'm not so sure where it goes. What's the difference between a thesis and the "So what?" that is answered in a narrative?	Excellent answer because it doesn't claim to answer everything completely. Note that the answer to the question includes questions about the "So what?" This is good because the discussion question is meant to have you demonstrate what you know from the previous information in the chapter, and to have you ask questions that lead to better writing. This student seems confident enough to use the question for her own benefit. The question about narration as a "more general 'thing'" is useful.

3. When I see terms like "rising action" and "climax," I think about the kinds of things a literature class studies. What is the difference between the kind of narrative represented by something like "Little Red Riding Hood" and a history book about the U.S. Civil War or a chemistry lab report?

4. My aunt tells me "urban legends," like the one about the stolen kidneys. Are these narratives? What is the point of this kind of stuff? Is *any* story with a message (an answer to "So what?") sufficient? I would like to know what is *not* a narrative?

5. If all narratives are created by someone, why are not you talking about narrators? Or maybe about how authors create narrators who tell stories?

Flow Chart for Writing Narrations



Writing Your Own Narratives

If you send a text message, post something to the wall of your Facebook account, "tweet" something for your Twitter account, send an email, toy with your Second Life, you are writing. In fact, most people write effectively in specific environments. You probably do too. The two problem "environments" for students tend to be the professional world and the school world. If you are telling yourself, "Yeah, and that's because the people in those worlds are older and

either do not text or don't know how to text," you are right. It is true that there are generational differences in writing. The real question is whether or not you want to operate in the world that seems to have these older types of communication. Because you are in a college classroom, we are assuming that your answer is "Yes, it's a practical skill worth learning."

Writing in professional and academic environments requires a good sense of how different groups use different writing tools for different tasks. To find out about this is to "map" existing knowledge. One of the best maps of how college students write was drawn by the "Writing in Digital Environments" program at Michigan State University. Here are their findings:

What Kinds of Writing do College Students Do & Value Most? OMG! TXT!

Posted on September 9, 2010 by hartdav2

A new multi-institutional study led by the WIDE research center at Michigan State University finds that U.S. College Students have rich and complex writing lives. The survey of 1366 students finds that sending and receiving SMS messages — "texting" — is the most frequent and most valued type of writing for this group,with more respondents reporting using a cell phone on a regular basis than a pencil. Cell phones were also surprisingly versatile writing tools for students, accounting for genres as varied as shopping lists and interpersonal notes to drama and poetry.

A white paper describing the initial findings includes the following:

- SMS texts (i.e., texts using short message services on mobile devices), emails, and lecture notes are three of the most frequently written genres (or types) of writing
- SMS texts and academic writing are the most frequently valued genres
- Some electronic genres written frequently by participants,such as writing in social networking environments, are not valued highly
- Students' write for personal fulfillment nearly as often as for school assignments
- Institution type (2yr, 4yr; Doctoral vs. Masters granting,etc.) is related in a meaningful way to the writing experiences of participants, particularly what they write and the technologies used
- Digital writing platforms—cell phones, Facebook, email—are frequently associated with writing done most often
- Students mostly write alone, and writing alone is valued over writing collaboratively

You should carefully review this summary. It explains not only *what* kinds of writing students do most, but also it tells what people in a typical classroom are likely to value.

There is a difference between what the MSU report says and the kind of writing expected in high school, college, and at work. That difference is the subject of the first assignment. The assignment is called a "Writing Literacy" assignment because it asks you to tell a story about a moment when your experience as a writer was different from the expectations of some specific authority, assignment, or experience.

Assignment #1

A Literacy Narrative

So Far:

#1: In Chapter 1, we identified three aspects of writing: 1) mapping the territory; 2) identifying its gaps; 3) re-drawing the map to improve it. We emphasized that writing does not simply copy the existing map. The way we improve the map is to incorporate our own ideas and insights into a new, improved version of what is available.

#2 We built a specific concept of narration as a form of story telling. The key elements of this concept include sequence, chronology, plot structure, narrator, and a statement of meaning.

#3: We recognized that, as both readers and as writers, we deal with the choices that select the materials for our narratives. All writers must be selective, and both readers and writers must recognize that narrative choices reflect the beliefs, values, experience, and knowledge of the writer.

Next

#1: Write a *story* (narrative) that tells about a time when your understanding of writing clashed with how a person from another generation thought about writing. You might use an example from an interaction with a parent, a teacher, or some authority figure.

#2: Your *story shows* how you think about writing in ways that are different from how other generations think about it. What does it mean that the current college generation values sms/text more than emails or even hand-written letters? You are telling a story that makes the point; you are *not* writing *about* narrative.

#3 Remember to review this chapter to make sure that you are creating a narrative. Pay close attention to the requirement that you answer the "So what?" that your reader will ask. Ask yourself what your story says about what "writing" means in today's world. Report that meaning in the paper.

Assignment #2

Telling a Story About Your Writing

So Far:

#1: We have built a specific concept of narration. The key elements of this concept include sequence, chronology, a statement of meaning, a plot structure, and a narrator.

#2 We have recognized that, as both readers and as writers, we will deal with the choices that select the materials for our narratives. All writers must be selective, and both readers and writers must recognize that the choices reflect the beliefs, values, experience, and knowledge of the writer. Thus, narrations can never be neutral, and they always embody many assumptions. Good readers are aware of the choices and their associated values. Good writers know how to select materials for narrations so that the message and the content of the narration are connected.

#3: We have identified three aspects of writing: mapping the territory; identifying its gaps; re-drawing the map to improve it. We have emphasized that writing does not simply copy the existing map. The way we improve the map is to incorporate our own ideas and insights into a new, improved version of what is available. For help developing your paragraphs, see the "Four Function" model in the Toolkit.

Next

#1: Your job is to write a letter that uses a narrative. This letter must be an application for one of the following: an internship; a scholarship; a grant; a job; admission to a specific academic program, or some similar opportunity. The letter must be organized as a narrative whose "meaning" is that you are the person who should be selected. It must reflect a thorough understanding and use of the concepts established in this chapter.

#2: Your paper will use *all* the tools provided below to produce the letter. These steps ensure that you will use the mapping metaphors we have established. These steps and tools will help you produce an effective letter with a better chance of getting you what you want. These steps not only will help produce a good letter, but also they are the steps used to create a useful document for almost any goal. Thus, the assignment is useful just for itself, but it also teaches techniques that can be used elsewhere.

#3: You will submit the following:

- The job posting, scholarship application, internship application, or similar document to which your letter responds.
- All of the steps described below that lead to the submission draft
- The submission draft

Tips for Persuasive Narrative Letters

1. **Establish your aim**:

   The letter has to have a purpose (an aim), and it must be specific. For example, it might be, "I want XYZ Company to hire me as unpaid intern in its graphic design section," or, "I want the ABC Company of Massachusetts to hire me as a process engineer for OEM sub-assembly suppliers to Ford Motor Company," "I want to join the Peace Corps so that I can use my skills as an 'A-Certified' Microsoft technician to help a third-world, Spanish-speaking country." You must name a real goal; if there is no chance of getting what you want, select something else. Obtain a copy of the document that describes the position and/or the application process and use the TEQ Sheet in the Handbook to thoroughly understand the world you are entering.

2. **Map the Territory**

   Build at least one paragraph *for yourself* that describes each of the following: your *audience's* values, needs, and expectations. Next, write at least one paragraph *for yourself* that describes how well your own talents, skills, values, needs, and expectations match what the job description. Most people are oddly unaware of their many skills. Certifications for CPR, computer training, life guard, auto-tech, and a host of other technical skills can be used as events in the story of your discipline and growth. Similarly, volunteer work often requires specific organizational skills. These too are building blocks for narrating the kind of person you are. If you have a good resume, you might want to review the history it records or the skills that it lists. Conclude with a judgment about the likelihood that you can succeed. Name the tasks you must complete -- finding information, building lists of accomplishments, naming skills -- that will enable you to produce a strong letter. Use the Purpose & Problem Statement format from the Handbook to complete this step.

Refer to James' emails and the responses from his professor to remind yourself of the kinds of things that are important in understanding the existing map of the audience and the map of your own claims.

3. **Identify the Gaps in the Map**

Build a paragraph *for yourself* that refers to the insights you have made about the opportunity and about yourself. In this paragraph, note what it is that you would bring to the organization/employer that is valuable. Perhaps you have had previous courses or experiences that have prepared you. Also note what it is that your audience wants. In the case of something like an internship, you can name a basic skill that would make you useful, but note that there is a specific gap in your experience that you would like to fill, i.e., that what you know theoretically needs a chance to "practice" in the real world. Ask yourself questions: Is there something about *you* that might be surprisingly useful? Effective entrepreneurs know that it is vital to have others realize that they have an unmet need, and your cover letter does that. Your letter has to walk a fine line between pointing out how *you* connect to the needs of your audience, and how you would like to serve their established goals. Review your Purpose & Problem Statement before beginning these paragraphs to make sure that you are thinking about the "fit" between their needs and your own talent, skills, experience and needs.

James' concern about "bragging" reflects one of the dangers of misunderstanding the power relationship you have with your audience. Modesty, clarity, and success are often related.

4. **Re-Draw the Map**

You are now ready to begin writing your paper. You have notes, paragraphs, and other writings based on observing the real world, real audiences, and real needs. You can now begin putting together a rough draft of the letter. This rough draft will be filled with "mistakes," but it will establish the basic organization of the letter you send. Review the application for key terms, required information, and for any other information that will help you select specific information for shaping the "character" you create in your narrative letter. Review the format for a business letter in the Handbook.

Review James' first draft of his letter. It is obvious that he expects to make major changes. He already knows that the rough draft is a far cry from the final draft. He expects big changes; so should you as you go through major versions of your letter.

Assignment #3

Creating & Analyzing Narratives to Understand Narration

So Far

#1: We have built a specific concept of narration. The key elements of this concept include sequence, chronology, a statement of meaning, a plot structure, and a narrator.

#2 We have recognized that as both readers and as writers, we will deal with the choices that select the materials for our narratives. The reasons for making choices about what to include and what to exclude in/from a particular story vary. Perhaps some of the details are not relevant to the "so what" (like the example from the beginning of the chapter); or maybe some details are not questions that the discipline asks as in the Parry and Doan reading. Or perhaps the details signify the distinction between personal and public (in the case of a cover letter for a job). Nevertheless, there are many legitimate reasons for constructing an "incomplete" map.

#3 So far, your readings have been examples of writers using narration. Each example has shown someone using the mode. This next two readings are different. They are different because they are about narration and what narration does. Thus, they are a different kind of example from the preceding ones. The first one is annotated to help you get started, but the final one is not. That is your task.

#4: We have identified three aspects of writing: mapping the territory; identifying its gaps; redrawing the map to improve it. We have emphasized that writing does not simply copy the existing map. The way we improve the map is to incorporate our own ideas and insights into a new, improved version of what is available.

Next

#1: Your job for this assignment is to produce an autobiography for each of two different audiences. Your paper will follow many of the steps used to construct your letter; (see previous assignment). The beginning steps will ensure that you use the mapping metaphors we have established. These steps will also help produce good insight, good drafts, and good final documents. For example, for your audiences, you might choose a fiancée and your boss, or any other pair of people, each of whom comes from separate parts of your life. You will begin to map this territory by writing a paragraph describing your relationship to each person.

#2: Next, you will write two narratives; each will be an autobiography, but they will each appropriately reflect the particular relationship. These are two (2) separate autobiographies. Remember that a key aspect of narrative is knowing what to include and exclude. A police report about a stolen car would probably not include the kind of shoes the car's owner was wearing, but your discussion about your blind date might feature that detail as a main component of the story.

#3: The third section of your document will be a reflection on the differences in the two autobiographies. You will discuss how the differences illustrate important features of narration. In what ways does the frame of the narrative (context, audience, purpose) help to make the meaning, or the "so what" of the story? Reflect on how Doan and Perry, as well as Slavoj Žižek, address this issue, and how it shows up in your two separate autobiographies.

First Additional Reading for Assignment #3

Parry, Alan and Doan, Robert. *Story Re-Visions: narrative therapy in the postmodern world.* New York: Guilford P, 1994

Introduction Editor's Notes

Once upon a time, everything was understood through stories. Stories were always called upon to make things understandable. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said that "if we possess our why of life we can put up with almost any how" (1889/1968, p. 23). Stories always dealt with the "why" questions. The answers they gave did not have to be literally true; they only had to satisfy people's curiosity by providing an answer, less for the mind than for the soul. For the soul they were true, but probably no one bothered to ask whether that truth was factual or "merely" metaphorical. That question came much later.

Parry and Doan are reviewing the "map" of how narration has worked in our culture. Their map includes the names of famous philosophers (Nietzsche), and they emphasize their answer to "So what?" in the paragraph.

Most of the first questions were about origins: "Why is there something and not nothing?" "How did we get here?" "Who made the world, and why?" "Why did we get divided up into males and females?" "Why did trouble and sorrow enter the world?" "Why do they have to work instead of just enjoying the world's plenty?" "Why do women have pain in childbirth yet animals do not?" Before the modern era, all peoples of the world, whatever their level of sophistication or lack of it, attempted to answer these and other "big questions" through stories. People raised within the Western, Judeo-Christian tradition have generally been most familiar with the stories contained within the first three chapters of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. The Biblical stories of the origin of things and of our follies and failings give, virtually without exception, a distinctly moral dimension to the answers they provide. Folly and pain come to humankind, for instance, because Adam and Eve cannot observe even the one limitation placed upon them by the Creator. The creation stories of other peoples, by contrast, sometimes appear to have a whimsical quality to them: in the Haida story of the origins of humanity, for instance, Raven displays a knockabout curiosity in picking with his beak at a particularly lively and potentially delicious clam, within which is contained not a meal, but the first people.

The authors expand on the purpose that narratives serve. They do not seem interested in the tools and techniques that are the basis of narration. Instead, they are asking about the purpose that narratives serve. These writers assume that the reader already knows about narration. They are asking about what the mode does rather than how to create one.

All such stories have in common, however serious or whimsical, a quality of sufficiency. They give an answer to one of the big "why" questions in a way that most fully accounts for the implications of the question through images that make life meaningful within that culture. In other words, it is the meaningfulness of the answers given, rather than their factual truthfulness, that gives them their credibility. The hearers of the story believed that it was true because it was meaningful, rather than that it was meaningful because it was true.

Parry and Doan ask an even bigger question about narration: are the readers of a narrative supposed to accept a narration as a full and complete answer, or are they supposed to ask questions about what the narrative does *not* discuss?

The pursuit of truth over meaning as humankind's highest achievement probably **began** with Plato. This represents the introduction into the world of what the psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986) has described as the "paradigmatic" as opposed to the "narrative" mode of cognition. Bruner identifies these as nothing less than "two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought. Each provides distinct ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another" (p. 11). He goes on to define the paradigmatic or logico-scientific mode according to its "attempts to fulfill the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation. It employs categorization or conceptualization and the operations by which categories are established, instantiated, idealized and related one to the other to form a system" (p. 12). Its aim is the establishment of truth, whereas the the narrative mode seeks to convince on the basis of what he calls "verisimilitude" or "lifelikeness." Narrative also convinces . . . because it provides a web of meaning and connectedness to events, which reassures people that things happen as they do because they take place in a moral universe. As such, the narrative mode deals with what Bruner refers to as "the vicissitudes of intention" (p. 17). In our view, this is the proper domain of therapy: how people feel about themselves when their actions repeatedly fail to match their intentions, or their intentions fail to measure up to their aspirations. It follows that narratives are conversations about the dramatic ironies to which intentions are susceptible -- the many ways in which they surprise and confound people. As such, the subject matter of therapeutic conversation is, invariably, intentions gone awry.

The writers establish two key concepts: 1) "paradigmatic cognition" which is the kind of thinking that we see in math and in the sciences; and 2) "narrative cognition" which relies on making "lifelike" stories. This is why therapists have to help develop an answer to the "So what?" that patients ask. According to this paragraph, patients have one of two choices. The writers say that therapy is the development of a narrative about an intention that has "gone awry."

What does this essay tell us about narration?

This essay claims that meaning is always a part of a narrative. This meaning is not always directly stated. Often, we have to piece it together and arrive at a meaning. The meaning is there, but it relies on the reader to do some of the work.

Why does the "meaning" get so much emphasis in this textbook? "Meaning" is similar to what you have probably called a "thesis" in your high school work. Many of your high school papers may have been pro/con arguments in which you took a "side" of an issue and tried to "prove" that it was "true" and the other position was "false." Such papers serve a purpose, but they often assume that the meaning is "out there," waiting to be uncovered and shown to the world. Narrations are a more complex type of writing -- the kind that employers and professors value -- where the constellation of choices that make up the narrative have to be recognized as choices, the writer's choice to talk about some things, and to ignore others.

Second Reading for the Assignment

Censorship Today

Slavoj Žižek. "Censorship Today." http://www.lacan.com/zizecology2.htm

> "A man who believes himself to be a grain of seed is taken to the mental institution where the doctors do their best to finally convince him that he is not a grain but a man; however, when he is cured (convinced that he is not a grain of seed but a man) and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back very trembling of [sic] scare - there is a chicken outside the door and that he is afraid that it would eat him. "Dear fellow," says his doctor, "you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man". "Of course I know that," replies the patient, "but does the chicken know it?"
>
> "One of the elementary rules of culture is to know when (and how) to pretend NOT to know (or notice), to go on and act as if something which happened did not happen. When a person near me accidentally produces an unpleasant vulgar noise, the proper thing to do is to ignore it, not to comfort him: "I know it was an accident, don't worry, it doesn't really matter!" We

should thus understand in the right way the joke about the chicken: a madman's question is a quite pertinent question in many everyday situations. When parents with a young child have affairs, fight and shout at each other, they as a rule (if they retain a minimum of decency) try to prevent the child to notice it, well aware that the child's knowledge would have had a devastating effect on him - so what they try to maintain is precisely a situation of "We know that we cheat and fight and shout, but the child/chicken doesn't know it." (Of course, in many cases, the child knows it very well, but merely feigns not to notice anything wrong, aware that in this way his parents' life is a little bit easier.) Or, at a less vulgar level, recall a parent in a difficult predicament (dying of cancer, in financial difficulties), but trying to keep this secret from his nearest and dearest..."

SUMMARY

Writers have a purpose when they write. They want somebody to understand something; they want a job; they want information; they want an internship; they want a scholarship, they want to be admitted to a particular program or college. This purpose results in a document that helps them get something important to their lives. It is especially valuable as an example of the way narration can be used in professional documents.

Looking Ahead

We will continue to think of writing as a kind of mapping task, and three tasks -- *understanding, assessing, and using* -- are another way of stating the mapping metaphor.