DOCUMENT SUMMARY This paper by Nancy L. Stein, "The Definition of a Story," explores the theoretical debates surrounding what constitutes a story. Stein critiques the narrow view that stories primarily serve to entertain, arguing instead that their functions are multifaceted, including instruction, cultural preservation, and personal problem-solving. The paper evaluates several definitions, including state-change models, **goal-based definitions** (like **story grammars**), and theories requiring an **affective response** from the reader, ultimately proposing that no single set of features defines all stories; rather, context and content are critical.

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FORMATTED CONTENT

THE DEFINITION OF A STORY

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This paper presents a discussion of theory and data related to the concept of a story. Three major issues are considered: (1) the functions of stories; (2) the relationship between function and comprehension of stories; and (3) the definition of a story. In addressing these issues, several different perspectives are considered. It is argued that the functions of storytelling are multifaceted and mirror the wide variety of motives that underlie human social behavior. This position is in direct contrast to recent arguments that the primary purpose of the story is to entertain.

A review of several current definitions of a story is then presented, along with a discussion of the differences that exist among the different definitions. By reviewing psychological approaches to the organization of conceptual knowledge, it is argued that there is not a unique set of features which is used to identify stories. An alternative framework is then presented, where it is shown that the context and semantic content of events in a story sequence, as well as certain structural features, are critical in determining the class of stories and non-storica.

The function of storytelling

The reasons for telling stories are an integral part of understanding how people come to recognize stories versus other forms of discourse. Historically, the story was used to preserve the culture of a civilization. Often the only available records of a society were the oral stories passed down from generation to generation. These tales were told with great care as to the accuracy of the events that were influential in the evolution of the society. The words for "story" in Italian and German still reflect the historical dimension incorporated into the story form.

As time passed, however, stories were also used as a means of instructing others. Stories were told to explain natural phenomena (eg, the process by which a caterpillar becomes a butterfly) as well as to convey the predominant social and moral codes of a society.

Another evolving function of storytelling concerns the resolution of personal social problems and the recapitulation and reorganization of personal experience. In several studies, it has been found that children and adults frequently use the story form to recreate a version of their previous experiences, and in doing so often elaborate or change the organizational structure of their experience. By retelling a personal "story", both children and adults frequently impose a more elaborate structure on their personal knowledge of a situation.

In some current approaches to the study of the story, especially that of Brewer and Lichtenstein, the multifaceted nature and approach to the story is overlooked. They also state that the primary function of the story is to entertain.

> Although Brewer and Lichtenstein would like to assert that storytelling serves mainly an entertainment function, the myriads of data collected on storytelling contradict this statement.

In reviewing anthologies and collections of stories from different cultures, no one would argue with the fact that there is a definite subgroup of stories that is used to entertaim or to create a "pleasurable" feeling in the comprehender. However, there is also a large number of stories told not to "entertain".

> Stories can be told to create pain as well as pleasure, and to "drive a point home".

In fact, many stories have endings or events occurring within them that are painful illustrations of the stupidity and often hopeless nature of mankind.

In contrast to Brewer and Lichtenstein's assertion that stories are told primarily for entertainment purposes, I would contend that the story serves to create both pleasure and pain. Furthermore, a story can be used to satisfy almost any subgoal relevant to creating pleasure or pain. Thus, the storyteller can aim to persuade, flatter, embarrass, shame, anger, teach, explain, etc. The goals are as varied as those which underlie human behavior.

The relationship among function, structure, and comprehension of stories

Brewer and Lichtenstein's distortion of the assumptions underlying the construction of **story grammars** illustrates their failure to understand the basic purposes of recent approaches to story comprehension.

Lichtenstein and Brewer argue that in any study of the story, two structures must be considered: the **discourse structure** and the **event structure**. The discourse structure refers to the sequence of events in any given text, while the event structure refers to the sequence of events in the real or an imagined world. Implicitly or explicitly stated in Lichtenstein and Brewer's discussion are the following statements concerning the grammatical approaches to stories:

1. the **story grammars** place the defining characteristics of stories at the level of the **discourse structure**;
2. little effort is made to describe the **event structure** of stories (e.g., in the head of the comprehender);

3. texts containing any violations of the grammatical rules will not be comprehended as well as texts conforming to the grammatical rules;
4. texts containing violations of any of the grammatical rules will not be judged as stories.

Lichtenstein and Brewer take sharp exception to the last two hypotheses, stating that rearranging the discourse structure of a text may cause a comprehender to rate a sequence as even more prototypical of a story than sequences following the real time order of events.

In all attempts to describe stories, a major emphasis has focused on generating a description of how the subject organizes knowledge about stories, in terms of encoding and representing a given story text. Additionally, great care has been taken to describe how an internal cognitive structure (a story schema) is used during the act of comprehending a story. In rereading all of the studies concerning story grammars, it is evident that continual reference is made to examining the relationship between the discourse structure of a story and the internal representation in the head of the comprehender. Thus, Lichtenstein and Brewer's contention that the grammars place the defining feature of stories at the discourse structure level is simply incorrect.

The definition of a story

The central issue of importance in all of these recent controversies, however, has been more focused on just what features are used by subjects to identify stories and non-stories. Just as the functions of storytelling vary, so do the definitions. To date, we (Stein and Policastro in press) have found over twenty different definitions of the story. A common assumption underlying all approaches is that the story is perceived to have a unique identifiable structure.

I have done is to group the viewpoints held about the story concept into four categories:

1. those that describe the minimal components of a story in terms of state-event-state changes, without arguing for the necessity of including goal-directed behavior in a story sequence;
2. those that describe stories as basically reflecting goal-directed behavior in relationship to the unfolding and resolution of personal social problems;
3. those that criticize existing goal-based definitions and argue for more detailed definitions than those offered in the goal-based descriptions;
4. those that contend that there is no one unique set of features used to define a story, because the context and the specific events in the narrative are thought to be critical in determining the exact features included in a story text.

Prince's (1973) definition most closely approximates the first viewpoint, where the essential features of a story include a state-event-state change sequence, without including the necessity of goal-based behavior or even the inclusion of an animate protagonist.

The group of **goal-based definitions** is best exemplified by the work of **Stein and Glenn (1979)** and **Mandler and Johnson (1977)**. These investigators claim that indirect or direct reference must be made to the following features:

1. a specific protagonist capable of intentional behavior;
2. the motivation and/or goals of a protagonist;
3. overt actions carried out in the service of a goal;
4. information concerning the attainment or non-attainment of the goal.

The second criticism levied at the grammars is most focussed in the recent papers of **Brewer and Lichtenstein**. Their main contention is that an **affective response** on the part of the comprehender (such as curiosity, surprise, suspense) must be experienced in order for the text to be considered a story. The critical difference in Brewer and Lichtenstein's approach, when compared with that of the story grammarians, does not focus on the addition of an affective variable. Rather, the difference lies in where the affective response must occur. For Brewer and Lichtenstein, the comprehender must experience an affective response; for Stein and Glenn (1979) and Mandler and Johnson (1977), the affective response must be experienced by the protagonist in a story.

Three definitions of a minimal story

(1) Prince's minimal story (state-event-state change)

(a) Three conjoined events.

(b) The first and third events must be stative, the second must be active.

(c) The first event must precede the second, while the second must precede and also cause the third.

(d) The first event must be the inverse of the third.

(2) Stein and Glenn's minimal story (goal-based)

(a) Setting which contains reference to a specific animate protagonist.

(b) Either an initiating event or an internal response.

(c) An overt attempt to attain the goal.

(d) A consequence, signifying whether or not the goal has been attained.

(3) Mandler and Johnson's minimal story

Non-goal-based	**Goal-based**
(a) Setting	(a) Setting
(b) A beginning	(b) Either a beginning or a complex reaction
(c) A simple reaction (1) An emotional response (2) An unplanned action	(c) An attempt
(d) An ending	(d) An outcome

(e) An ending

An alternative viewpoint of the story concept

From the previous discussion, it is evident that many differences exist in terms of describing the type of knowledge which is used to define a story.

> I have argued, however, that the basic issue may not revolve around which definition is the correct one, but around the issue of whether there is just one set of features used to define a story.

If we look at the theoretical framework used to study the conceptual organization of natural objects, as exemplified in the approach taken by Rosch and her colleagues, a different approach to the study of concepts and categories emerges. From this perspective, whether or not an object is considered part of a particular category depends upon the similarity of that object to a **prototypical representation** of the object in the head of the observer. In determining whether an object will be included in a category, it is not necessary for the object to have a particular attribute in common with all other members. More important is the context in which an object occurs.

I have argued that this theoretical framework might be useful in considering how conceptual knowledge about the story is organized. The set of features used to define a story may be dependent upon the context in which the story occurs.

> Thus, what I am proposing is that a non-goal-based episode, containing the features of Prince's definition, would be accepted as a story, as long as the events in the sequence contain information enabling the comprehender to infer that goal-directed action was not possible in given context.

However, if the events in the discourse sequence are perceived to be amenable to a planful course of action, and if this course of action does not occur, then the comprehender will judge the text as not a story, because of the missing elements.

Goal-based stories, as described by Stein and Glenn (1979) and Mandler and Johnson (1977) were always rated as stories when all parts of the story episode were included in the discourse structure.

As to whether texts had to arouse affect in a reader in order to be classified as a story, our results indicated that an affective response was not a necessary factor in making decisions about whether or not a text was a story. These data strongly suggest that an affective component is not a necessary part of a story definition.

> Reviewing the results from all studies, it is apparent that no one definition will account for all of the judgments made about stories and non-stories. The context and specific events of the story sequence are critical in determining which features must be included in a story text.

Within the group of texts rated as stories, however, there is a consistent ranking of passages with respect to how **"good" a story** is in terms of its representative nature of the category. Texts corresponding to the most complex definitions of Labov and Waletzky (1967) were

considered to be better stories than goal-based episodes without complications and obstacles, and in turn, goal-based episodes were considered to be better stories than non-goal-based stories. Thus, in considering the concept of a story, the criterion of "goodness" seems to be used consistently across all subjects.

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