DOCUMENT SUMMARY

This seminal theoretical paper examines the definition of a story from psychological and cognitive perspectives, analyzing different approaches to story comprehension and the relationship between narrative function and structure. The work provides foundational understanding of how stories are organized, comprehended, and used for social and therapeutic purposes.

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FORMATTED CONTENT

The Definition of a Story

Nancy L. Stein
University of Chicago

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Abstract

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-stories**. Data from three studies are used to support this point of view.

Introduction

> Stories are perhaps one of the oldest literary forms known to mankind. Through stories, the history and cultural heritage of many societies has been preserved. By analyzing the content and structure of stories, we have been able to enrich our knowledge of many cultures, as well as our understanding of cross-cultural differences in the values and ethics of social interaction.

Recently, a novel way of studying the story has emerged. With the advent of computers and artificial intelligence, many researchers have attempted to use the tools of computer science, along with advances made in cognitive psychology, to develop a theoretical framework for studying how people organize and acquire knowledge about stories. At the heart of these recent attempts (Johnson and Mandler 1980; Mandler and Johnson 1977; Rumelhart 1975, 1977; Schank and Abelson 1977; Stein 1978, 1979, in press; Stein and Glenn 1979).

The Functions 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 and precision and conveyed the accuracy of the events that were influential in the evolution of the society.

Indeed, an example of the historical story is the **Haggada**, a description of the events that preceded and caused the Jewish people to celebrate Passover, a holiday of remembrance and deliverance from slavery. 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 (e.g., the process by which a caterpillar becomes a butterfly) as well as to convey the predominant social and moral codes of a society. Indeed, some stories were still used to introduce children and adults to new ways of thinking about values, and to present points of view that might initially be contrary to those held by a listener or reader.

Organizations still exist in the United States for the sole purpose of using the story to instruct children in the lessons of "life" and to give them insight into the motives for different patterns of behavior.

> Another evolving function of storytelling concerns the resolution of personal social problems and the recapitulation and reorganization of personal experience (Goffman 1974; Labov and Waletzky 1967; Sutton-Smith 1976).

In several studies (Labov and Waletzky 1967; Pitcher and Prelinger 1963; Quasthoff and Nikolaus 1981; Turkel 1981), 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 adults and adults frequently impose a more elaborate structure on their personal knowledge of a situation. In doing so, the teller often integrates unconnected segments of information into a more cohesive representation.

Indeed, **Progloff (1977) and Rainer (1978) have argued that personal story writing should be required in schools and is often a must to insure some real form of self-growth**. Thus, although stories function to transmit historical and important social information, there is wide consensus about the therapeutic value of the story as a medium for solving personal social problems.

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. In presenting a review of approaches to the story concept, **Lichtenstein and Brewer rely primarily on the psychological and literary approach to the definition of a story**. They also state that the primary function of the story is to entertain. **Lichtenstein and Brewer even argue that current approaches to story comprehension are misguided because of their emphasis on informing the reader in the most efficient fashion**, ensuring that the maximal amount of information is retained.

Three facets of **Brewer and Lichtenstein's** argument which deserve discussion concern their interpretation about the function of storytelling in previous approaches to story understanding. **Brewer and Lichtenstein contend that investigators devising story grammars and goal-based approaches to comprehension implicitly assumed that the function of storytelling was to convey information as efficiently as possible**. However, a reviewing all of the sources from which this statement could be inferred, I have found not one overt or implied statement corresponding to **Brewer and Lichtenstein's** assertion.

Contrary to any statement made by individuals who adopted the grammatical or plan-based approaches to comprehension have almost always emphasized the multifaceted nature of storytelling in terms of the wide range of purposes and motivations underlying the act of telling a story (**Black and Bower 1980; Stein 1978; Stein and Policastro in press; Stein and Trabasso 1981**).

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 purpose of recent approaches to story comprehension. In order to illustrate how deep these misunderstandings are, I will present a short synopsis of **Lichtenstein and Brewer's** requirements for a theory of story structure knowledge. Included in this summary is their interpretation of the story grammar approach. Then I will contrast their interpretation with the actual data and discussions included in the recent story grammar studies.

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. (Here **Lichtenstein and Brewer** are referring to the comprehender's prior knowledge and expectations concerning the organization of events that have occurred in the real world.)

The use of these two structures is critical to **Lichtenstein and Brewer's** theory because these investigators contend that the lack of correspondence between the two structures often produces affective responses in comprehenders. That is, the manipulation of the temporal sequence of events in the **discourse structure** may be necessary in order to create the arousal of an affective response in the comprehender.

In the light of these conclusions, **Brewer and Lichtenstein** contrast their approach to those taken by the **story grammarians**. 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. They challenge the proposition that non-sequentially organized stories will not be comprehended as well by stating that some stories with "misarranged" discourse structures might be comprehended even better than discourse structures organized according to the rules outlined in the grammars.

In order to illustrate **Lichtenstein and Brewer's** distortions of the positions taken by the story grammarians, I have used data and statements from several of my own studies (Nezworski et al. 1982; Stein 1978, 1979; Stein and Glenn 1979; Stein and Goldman 1981; Stein and Nezworski 1978) as well as from those by **Mandler and her colleagues** (Johnson and Mandler 1980; Mandler 1978; **Mandler and DeForest 1979; Mandler and Johnson 1977**).

First, the issue of just **what is described in the grammars must be elucidated**. In all attempts to describe stories, a major emphasis has been 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. A set of working hypotheses was constructed to examine comprehension when texts did and did not correspond to the internal structure of story knowledge that the comprehender had acquired (Johnson and

Mandler 1980; **Mandler 1978; Mandler and DeForest 1979; Stein and Glenn 1979; Stein and Goldman 1981; Stein and Nezworski 1978**).

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. Furthermore, in order to describe the discourse and internal structures of stories, assumptions about theories of social understanding, action theory, and theories of naive psychology were continually evoked (Stein 1978; **Stein and Glenn 1979; Stein and Goldman 1981**). In fact, a clear assumption made by all who took a grammatical approach to stories was that knowledge of stories was acquired by participating in social interaction as well as by hearing and reading a variety of different stories. The parts of an episode, as outlined in either the **Mandler and Johnson** (1977) or the **Stein and Glenn** (1979) grammars, closely approximate the social episode, as described in the work of many researchers.

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.

Despite the popularity of this belief, no one, until recently, had systematically investigated whether or not a stable concept for a story exists. One reason for the lack of research is that a conceptual description of a complex structure, like the story, is at best difficult to construct. An essential component of an adequate definition would be the inclusion of all features which must appear in a text for it to be labelled a story. Another component would be that the definition be concrete enough to be tested for its descriptive adequacy.

Although many definitions for a story exist, most lack either a clear description of the essential features or adequate criteria for deciding which features must always be included in a story. There is a group of definitions, however, where the minimal set of features is described in enough detail to test the descriptive adequacy of the definitions.

Some of these definitions overlap to such an extent that not all of them are presented here. Rather, what 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. All that is necessary is a **change of state in the physical environment**. However, a change of state in the emotional feeling or desire of a protagonist can also form the basis of a minimal story. A description of **Prince's** minimal story appears on the top of table 1.

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**.

Mandler and Johnson (1977; **Johnson and Mandler** 1980) define a story in similar terms. There are two important differences between their definition and that of **Stein and Glenn** (1979). First, **Mandler and Johnson** (1977) propose two different definitions of a story, one which is goal-based and one which is not. Their definition of a goal-based story is similar to **Stein and Glenn's**, with one exception. **Mandler and Johnson** argue that in addition to the four mandatory features included in **Stein and Glenn's** definition, an ending must be included as the final episodic category, where this category conveys a moral or more general consequences of the protagonist's goal attainment effort.

The description of **Mandler and Johnson's** non-goal-based story allows for the occurrence of an emotional response and unplanned action on the part of the form of the latter part of an episode, where the protagonist experiences an event, which then causes him or her to respond emotionally with a series of automatic reactions. The reactions are then that normally accompany particular types of state changes can be included in story form. Some of the restricted information Johnson 1977). There are even investigators who restrict the story form to a certain type of goal-directed behavior. **Labov and Waletzky** (1967) contend that not only does goal-directed behavior have to be included in a story text, but that the goal-based behavior has to be a novel one, not normally used to solve the problem or conflict at hand. What is being suggested in these more complex approaches is that the protagonist has to face a series of obstacles, where the normal plan of action cannot be used to solve a problem.

An Alternative Viewpoint of the Story Concept

From the previous discussion, it is evident that many differences exist in terms of defining the type of knowledge which is used to define a story. Some investigators see the story as a way of representing many different types of human experience, as exemplified in the definition of **Prince** (1973) where all types of state changes can be included in story sequences. On the other hand, there is a set of investigators who restrict the range of experience that can be represented in story form. Some of the restricted definitions require only certain types of social experience, such as the well as the inclusion of goal-directed behavior (**Stein and Glenn** 1979, **Mandler and Johnson** 1977). There are even investigators who restrict the story form to a

certain type of goal-directed behavior. **Labov and Waletzky** (1967) contend that not only does goal-directed behavior have to be included in a story text, but that the goal-based behavior has to be a novel one, not normally used to solve the problem or conflict at hand.

In determining whether or not 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. The context may make certain features of the prototypical form more important than others. Thus, two members of the same category may not have many features in common, simply because the contextual framework surrounding the presentation of an object accentuates different features of the prototype.

Which features can be deleted from an object have been left undefined by **Rosch and Mervis** (1975; **Mervis and Rosch** 1981). They state that category boundaries, for the most part, may not be well defined. A person may not have a consistent basis for defining category membership when an object lacks certain critical features or when the object contains a combination of features from two or more categories.

For those objects within the boundaries of a category, however, some will be considered better examples of the category, based upon the frequency with which the object occurs and whether it represents the largest number of instances of a particular category. Thus, although the boundaries of some categories may be fuzzy, within a category some instances are clearly more representative of the category than other instances.

In two recent papers (Stein and Policastro in press; **Stein and Kilgore** 1981), I have argued that this theoretical framework might be useful in considering how concepts of knowledge about the story is organized. My first point is that the importance concerns the set of features used to identify whether or not a text belongs to the story category. The set of features used to define a story may be dependent upon context in which the story occurs.

Especially sensitive to contextual constraints may be the necessity of including **goal-based behavior in a story sequence**. In real life, there are situations where a protagonist is simply overcome by the environment, without being able to exert any control over the circumstances that result as a function of a particular set of initiating events. Examples of these situations are found when a protagonist is placed in a novel or threatening environment, where there is not enough time to plan a course of action or where the protagonist doesn't have the prerequisite knowledge to formulate a plan. Thus, **Prince's** (1973) minimal set of features which do not include goal-based action as an essential dimension would suffice to describe stories that reflect those situations.

The critical question is whether **Prince's** definition could be used to discriminate the entire category of stories from non-stories. That is, if a text had all of **Prince's** essential features, would it always be judged as a story? If the conclusion from our recent studies is that **Prince's** definition is not sufficient in all situations for a text to be considered part of the story category. Only when stories convey unambiguously that goal-directed action could not have occurred will subjects judge non-goal-based texts as part of the story category.

The explanation for these judgments is based on the following hypothesis. Although non-goal-based episodes occur in real life interactions, they do not occur very frequently. For the most part, people are involved in social situations where they do have the time and knowledge to plan a series of actions to attain a goal. Thus, goal-directed action would be the expected course of action in a story. If non-goal-directed actions or events occurred, they would have to be well

marked to indicate that the possibility of pursuing a planful course of action was not available to the protagonist. Otherwise, the sequence of events would not be considered a story, because a critical element would be judged to be missing from the sequence. Thus, what I am proposing is that non-goal-based episodes, containing the features of **Prince's** definition would be accepted as a story, as long as the events in the sequence could not be interpreted in more than one way, by clearly understanding the motives and goals of a protagonist. Frequently, a set of actions is presented in a story, where the protagonist's motives are interpreted in more than one way, and where the protagonist goes about solving a problem, what type of obstacles are encountered and how the story ends, the consensus that a story is good will vary dramatically. An examination of two or more movie critics' review of the same film provides strong support for this claim.

My point in discussing differing responses to the same story is to highlight the role of the comprehender, in terms of the attitudes, needs, beliefs, and prior knowledge brought to the story understanding task. Although some beliefs, interests, needs, may be widely shared, others are not. Depending upon what themes are conveyed in a story, how the protagonist goes about solving a problem, what type of obstacles are encountered and how the story ends, the consensus that a story is good will vary dramatically. An examination of two or more movie critics' review of the same film provides strong support for this claim.

References

[Complete reference list follows in standard academic format]

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