The Graduate School
Office of Postdoctoral Affairs

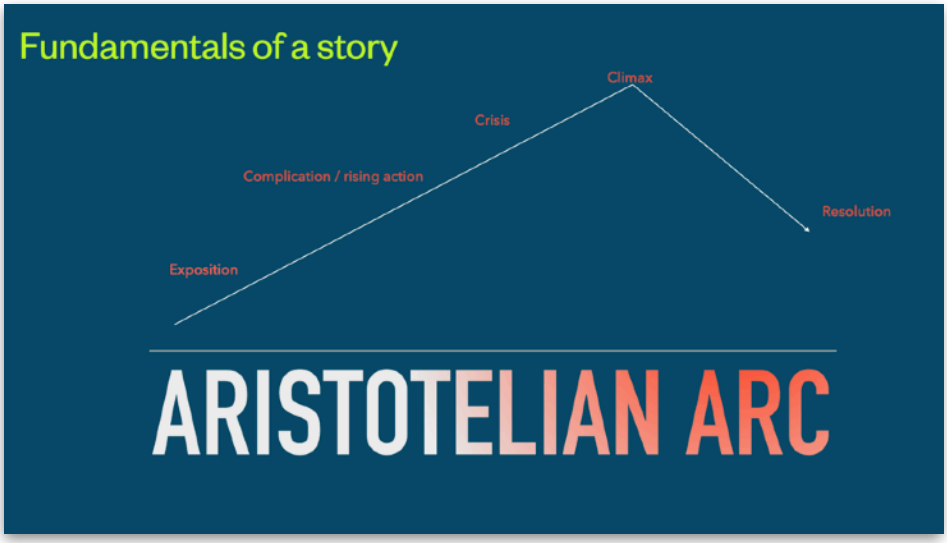
Popular Science Writing

Stephen Wrentmore
March 2021

Worksheet

Part 1

In the model I shared from Aristotle's Poetics was this idea of a journey. In this session we are going to look at how we might approach sketching that up.



SECTION 1

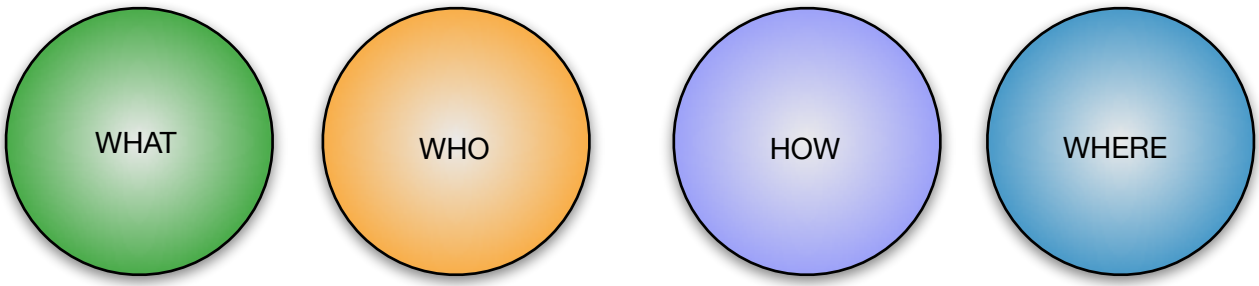
Lest look at the abstract: Research article:

Behavioral Processes
journal homepage: http://ees.elsevier.com

Alcohol conditioned contexts enhance positive subjective alcohol effects and consumption.

Joseph A.Lutz [a], Emma Childs [a,b,*]
[a] University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychiatry, 1601 W Taylor St MC912, Chicago, IL, 60612, USA
[b] University of Chicago, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neuroscience, 5841 S. Maryland Avenue, Chicago, IL,60637, USA

ABSTRACT
Associations between alcohol and the places it is consumed are important at all stages of alcohol abuse and addiction. However, it is not clear how the associations are formed in humans or how they influence drinking, and there are few effective strategies to prevent their pathological effects on alcohol use. We used a human laboratory model to study the effects of alcohol environments on alcohol consumption. Healthy regular binge drinkers completed conditioned place preference (CPP) with 0 vs. 80 mg/100 mL alcohol (Paired Group). Control participants (Unpaired Group) completed sessions without explicit alcohol-room pairings. After conditioning, participants completed alcohol self-administration in either the alcohol- or no alcohol-paired room. Paired group participants reported greater subjective stimulation and euphoria, and consumed more alcohol in the alcohol-paired room in comparison to the no alcohol-paired room, and controls tested in either room. Moreover, the strength of conditioning significantly predicted drinking; participants who exhibited the strongest CPP consumed the most alcohol in the alcohol-paired room. This is the first empirical evidence that laboratory-conditioned alcohol environments directly influence drinking. The results also confirm the viability of the model to examine the mechanisms by which alcohol environments stimulate drinking



WHY DO WE NEED TO KNOW THIS?

Point of attack therefore could come from any of these perspectives:

1. The person who drinks
2. The drink*/ drink-maker
3. The space and the space maker
4. The triangle: person/drink/space
5. The researcher(s). But must add an angle as to why they are talking.

We will not manage the whole paper, but let's work through it together, looking for the parts that we might distill into our popular science story…
Each step is a point of landing and acceleration that propels us forward.
The point of entry might not be the beginning of your research; it could, for example, be the heart of your research; looking at Lutz and Childs research piece, I might start:

As I fished the cherry from the bottom of my Manhattan, and wondered if a second $16 drink would be indulgent. I looked around the room, the dim lights, the sexy people, all leaned intimately towards each other, the resplendent bar-staff in clean white linen, and the attractive wall of bottles subtly up-lit to make the contents glow, and thought…

I am a little over-emphatic, but I am trying to point out how the point of thought, even if it is fictional, can become a point of entry to the reader. The descriptors and ambiance then form part of the body of the research and, I hope you can see in these few lines all those significant themes are introduced?

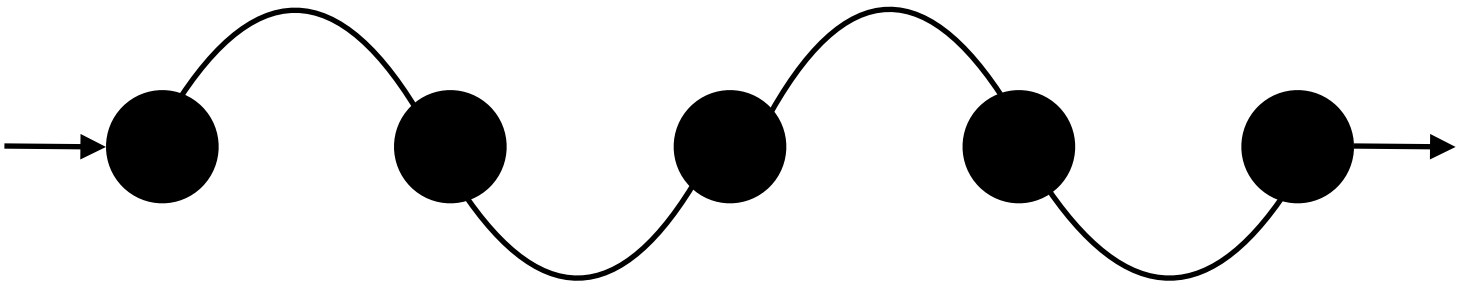
SECTION 2

Let's do the same with your abstract:
Take ten minutes. And then, we will share with the group.

Starting points:
What's the 'hook' - why do we care/need to know? (What's in it for me?)
Characters (the scientists doing the research) - Who is involved?
Scene (context for the research or the lab in which it was done)
Context (why is this necessary in a broader sense?)
Value (to whom?)
Immediacy: Creating light, a solution now (think Covid-19 vaccine), or mind-blowing (wow information).

Approach:

Tell us don't *prove* to us (you did that already)
Love it! Be enthusiastic - energize your writing (choose action words - don't be neutral)
Be brief - write, then edit. Then edit. Then edit.
Throw down your ideas so you can see them. Then pick out your threads.
It doesn't matter where you start writing - don't be linear. Then choose your beginning, middle, and end. Remember the joy is the journey, not reaching the end.
Don't forget your Aristotle: The ideas have lasted since 335 BCE; the structure will help you write and the reader to read.



Part 2

Blank Space /being wrong

I had an art teacher who so changed my conception of the blank space that I have never approached 'starting' with the same fear again. This teacher made us tape a beautiful piece of clean, white cartridge paper to a board and then mount it on an easel. He then asked us to load our brushes with a primary color - any, it was our choice. When the brush was fully loaded, he asked that we draw from the top left to the bottom right corner before recharging our brush. He then asked we create a large smudge in the middle of the page. "Look," he said, "your piece of paper is ruined; now start to paint."

So, when I started this document and watched the little cursor blinking in the top left corner of a blank white screen, there was a moment of wondering how to start… and my confidence in the delete button propelled me forward.

Sometimes the act of starting is enough to get everything else rolling.

Let's consider your research paper and play out some starting scenarios:

Part 3

Research links:

Daniel Pham: Public engagement is key for the future of science research, NPJ 2016. https://www.nature.com/articles/npjscilearn201610

Jim Kozubek: "Science is about storytelling, expectations and plot reversal, as much as it is about any particular facts." Scientific American, 2018. https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/the-future-of-science-storytelling/

Josh Ettinger, "It's all about the journey." Nature 2020. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01731-9

Marina Joubert, Lloyd Davis and Jenni Metcalfe. Storytelling: the soul of science communication. Journal of Science Communication Vol. 18, 2019. https://jcom.sissa.it/archive/18/05/JCOM_1805_2019_E

Neuronline, 2019. https://neuronline.sfn.org/outreach/scientific-storytelling-how-to-win-hearts-and-minds

Michael F. Dahlstrom, Using narratives and storytelling to communicate science with non expert audiences, PNAS, 2014. https://www.pnas.org/content/111/Supplement_4/13614

David JP Philips, Science Storytelling. TED, 2017. https://youtu.be/Nj-hdQMa3uA

Ken Robinson, Do Schools Kill Creativity? TED 2006. https://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_do_schools_kill_creativity?utm_campaign=tedspread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare

Thanks to Andy Lloyd, Head of Development, Life Science Centre: https://www.life.org.uk

---

*The Drink: Arthur: "*What's so unpleasant about being drunk?*"
Ford: "You ask *a glass of water.*"
The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, Douglas Adams, 1979.