

CONFERENCE

Session Report

The Backbone of Manuscripts: Supporting Your Writing With Storytelling

Speaker

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Stories make your writing stronger and your message more engaging. Dr Crystal R. Herron uses tools and mindsets rooted in scientific observation to make her case for storytelling as the backbone of an effective manuscript.

STORIES TAP INTO THE POWER OF CURIOSITY—AND LOVE

Stories stimulate the production of love hormones. We feel good when we read, watch, or hear stories from others—the mechanism of this good feeling is greater levels of oxytocin. Leveraging the power of storytelling at every level of our writing helps us to connect with readers, engaging them and helping them remember what we said.

Data are like Lego building blocks, Dr Herron pointed out. Raw data are like a pile of Legos—it’s all there, but it’s a mess. We might sort these data by color so they’re a little easier to understand. Then we might present the data in a logical way, organizing the stacks of color by height. Now imagine those blocks rearranged into a Lego house, complete with a colorful front door and bordered with flowers. A house with personality invites questions (Who lives there? Will a little Lego guy walk out the front door soon?). Storytelling generates curiosity.

USING THE STACR STRUCTURE TO STRENGTHEN MANUSCRIPTS

Although variations abound, engaging stories tend to follow a similar structure, abbreviated as STACR (which ties in well with the Legos illustration!). Dr Herron explained this structure and how to use it to keep readers reading. She also gave examples for applying these ideas to a medical manuscript and mapping STACR onto the standard IMRaD (introduction, methods, results, and discussion) structure.

S = Setup

- Who are the characters in this story? (proteins, compounds, disease state, device)

- Where or in what setting does the story take place? (proteins within a particular cell, disease that affects a certain organ, patients in a hospital or outpatient location)
- What problem(s) surround the characters? (prevalence of the disease, previous devices that proved insufficient, no drug available)

T = Tension

- What do the characters need to accomplish? How can they solve the problem you set up? (disease progression needs to be slowed; gene mutation may change protein function)
- What question do you answer in this story? (Does this drug have fewer side effects than others available? Does this device work better?)
- How does this tension connect with the problem from your Setup section? (Making this connection helps to engage readers’ curiosity.)

A = Action

- What happens to address the questions raised in the Tension section? (What methods were used?)
- How did the characters respond to a change in the setting? (What were the results?)

C = Climax

- Did the characters answer the question? (What were the key findings and how did they answer the questions posed?)
- How will readers’ curiosity be satisfied? (Refer to elements raised in the Tension section.)

R = Resolution

- How have the characters and setting changed as a result of the action? (How does this work advance the field?)
- What value does this story offer? Why does it matter? (What is the significance of the study?)

Writing a manuscript using STACR helps readers understand the importance of your work and use what they’ve read.

In addition to giving a brief history of the standard manuscript structure, Dr Herron explained that the IMRaD structure follows the STACR flow fairly naturally (see Figure 1).

MICRO-STORIES STRENGTHEN YOUR WRITING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Additionally, Dr Herron explained that the story structure can be applied to paragraphs and sentences. Using this tool on nano and micro levels, in addition to the macro level, makes your entire document strong and dynamic, like a living organism with a backbone.

At the nano (sentences) level, the story arc is compressed into *setup*, *tension/action/climax*, and *resolution*. Basic sentences include a subject (introducing a character is the *setup*), verb (*tension/action/climax*), and object (*resolution*)—satisfying curiosity by answering what happened to the character). Dr Herron gave the following example:

- Setup: “Crystal” (what about Crystal? we are curious)
- Tension/Action/Climax: “loves” (ah, this is a positive sentence)
- Resolution: “dogs” (satisfies our curiosity about what Crystal loves)

Most of the sentences we write will be more complex than this, making it easier to create the setup, build tension, fill in the action, relieve tension with the climax, and resolve the nano-story.

Likewise, a great paragraph is made of micro-story arcs, arranged in an order that supports the overall story in the paper. Developing this structure on a paragraph level helps you ensure that each paragraph has a coherent purpose within the overarching story of the manuscript.

Ultimately, a manuscript tells the story of work that may have taken years to accomplish. Dr Herron challenged audience members to use a story structure to build and strengthen their manuscripts, enabling them to engage readers while informing them—and thereby have greater influence in the field.

For more on this topic, see “[The Intrinsic Story Structure of Original Research Manuscripts](#),” by Crystal R. Herron, in the March 2023 issue of this journal (*AMWA J.* 2023;38[1]).

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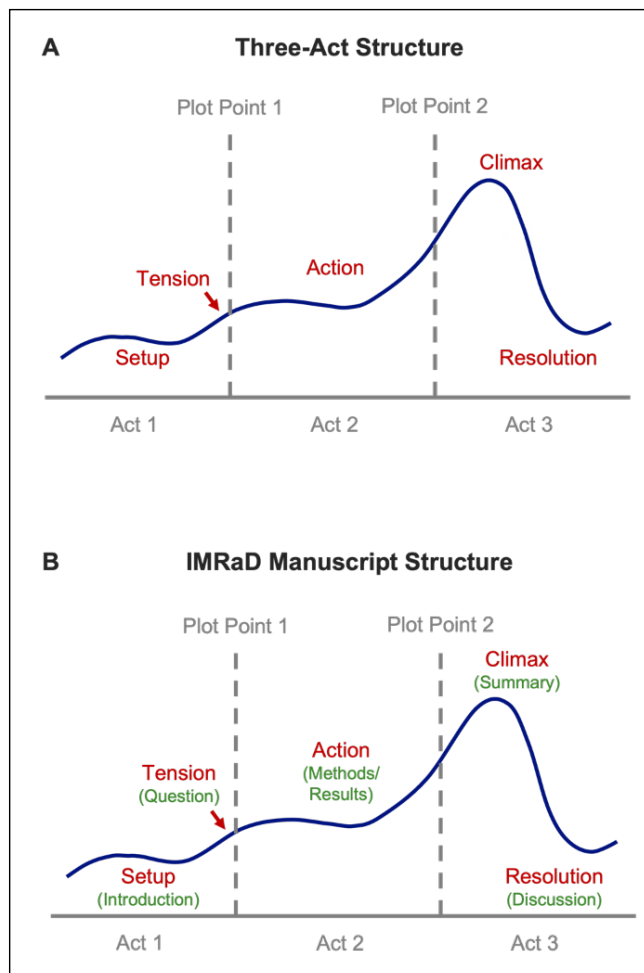


Figure 1. Three-act story structure in original research manuscripts. A. Three-act structure commonly found in stories. B. Three-act story structure found in original research manuscripts that follow the standard IMRaD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) structure. Reprinted from “The Intrinsic Story Structure of Original Research Manuscripts,” by Crystal R. Herron, in the March 2023 issue of this journal (*AMWA J.* 2023;38[1]).