

Tutors' Column: "Stories and Maps: Narrative Tutoring Strategies for Working with Dissertation Writers"

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In 2003, the University of Michigan's Sweetland Center for Writing initiated the Dissertation Writing Institute (DWI) to provide time, space, funding, and writing consultations to graduate students in the writing stage of their dissertations. Each spring term, Sweetland funds 24 graduate dissertators ("fellows") for an 8-week intensive writing program that combines interdisciplinary workshops, accountability meetings, and one-to-one sessions with consultants, all aimed at helping fellows develop their writing practices and speed their time to completion. A 3-year internal program evaluation showed that the DWI fellows, in surveys and interviews, valued the writing consultations as highly as they valued the office space, required writing time, and funding they received as participants. As program directors and experienced writing center faculty-consultants, we regularly draw on our MFA training to work with graduate dissertation writers across disciplines. In this column, we share 2 narrative approaches we use in the DWI to help DWI fellows gain conceptual distance from their in-progress texts. This distance helps them focus on the rhetorical dimensions of their dissertations as they invent new material, communicate the significance of their projects, develop local and global structures that work for their purposes, and consider the effects of possible choices on readers.

TELLING A STORY – PAUL

Anticipating audiences that range from advisors to funding agencies and hiring committees, doctoral students frequently express their desire to compose dissertations that tell stories. For these writers, *telling a story* serves as shorthand for showing how both the area of study and the dissertation's precise intervention matter. Reconceptualizing dissertation writing as a form of narration is thus particularly useful for consultants

serving graduate writers across the disciplines. Consultants can invoke the concept of “the story” to provide a way of talking about movement and narrative choices which, alongside disciplinary knowledge and conventions, can communicate the significance or “so what?” of the dissertation. The language used to invoke narrative as a framework for thinking about the dissertation and its rhetorical dimensions can be adapted to the graduate writer and discipline. For example, “Would opening with this vignette allow readers to experience the thematic concerns of the chapter?”—which is appropriate for the humanities—might be phrased differently in the sciences and social sciences: “Would describing the effects first help readers understand the problem this chapter is addressing?” A less directive approach in either case would be to ask students to suggest different angles to start from and to consider the effects of beginning with each.

Focusing on where the story begins is crucial. “What is the conflict?” in narrative becomes “What is the problem?” in dissertations. To demonstrate the mutability of this concept, I frequently draw on a way of structuring introductions used by engineering students I’ve worked with. Overall, their projects follow the scientific IMRaD (Introduction, Methods, Research, and Discussion) structure, and the introductions specifically answer four questions: 1) What is the problem? 2) What have others done to solve this problem? 3) What is missing? 4) What are the objectives of this project? The specific problem represents one side of a conflict, while prior scholarly work on the problem represents the other. Previous researchers have fueled the story, but now the doctoral student must advance it through its next chapters.

Some dissertations are in need of narrative *structure*. In a recent consultation, one student’s chapter on Indian religions and philosophy was intricate and depended on an archeological close reading in which he constructed an absent text by analyzing later texts which had responded to it. The student, assuming he should remove himself and his process of discovery from the chapter, initially constructed a chronological account that did not foreground his theory that a key text had been missing, nor the fact that he had reconstructed the missing text. Discussing the chapter as part of a narrative, he saw that he needed to present the material as the story of reconstructing the missing text, a move that would both emphasize what he had done and allow readers to experience their own process of exploration.

The writer restructured the chapter by beginning with the problem, a centuries-long textual debate that had ended almost without trace. Why? Before he could answer this question, he needed to say that the available texts (now silent on the debate) seemed to be responding to a further missing text. In its initial version, the chapter read as flat data progressing to an as-yet-unseen point of importance. In the revised version, I was able to piece together the investigation along with the writer and repeat the crucial steps of the argument back to him. In this case, the narrative structure made the stakes clear and provided a logic for the chapter that, much like a good story, could be easily recounted.

MAPPING OUT THE STORY – LOUIS

As dissertators strive to understand the contours of the genre and define the borders of their own projects, they often express concerns about how to shape and arrange their material. These kinds of structural concerns can open up conversations about how a student might organize her research and establish a critical narrative. In my initial meeting with dissertation writers, I use a mapping process to help the student and myself understand what the writer has done thus far, what stage the sections are in, and what the writer hopes to accomplish going forward. The map is a simple visual template with empty boxes representing the chapters in a linear outline. While the map allows writers to organize their thoughts in an informal discussion, it also functions as a storyboard on which they plot parts of their dissertation and the relationships among those parts. Writers can locate which sections have been drafted and where the current piece of writing fits into their project.

Beyond its explanatory function, mapping provides writers with a broad-stroke composing tool—one that suits the larger orchestrations of dissertation work. As evidence of the map’s effectiveness in a consultation, Sarah, a DWI fellow in musicology, described her use of mapping as a crucial “processing tool for me to start to figure out what sections make sense, [and] what could go in those sections.” Rather than become mired in linear writing, students like Sarah use mapping to think holistically, an approach which, as she said, allows her to think “more about fleshing out thoughts and organizational structure” than about perfecting prose.

Mapping, then, becomes a composing mode for many dissertators. They think through and visually represent the

arrangement and arcs of their work, whether in a section or chapter or across the whole dissertation. As Sarah suggested, “It’s the stuff that is simmering below the surface of language ... impulsive, instinctual connections that I try to push into the concrete language realm of thinking.” By adopting a mapping approach to composing, writers can gain the elbow room needed to work through their uncertainty. “I don’t have to leave the kind of creative mindset when I am mapping,” Sarah explained. “What mapping does is help me maintain progress through a project without putting too much pressure on the finality of finishing the thing.”

Mapping’s emphasis on arcs and narrative also encourages dissertation writers to develop a rhetorical awareness of the effect of their structural choices on readers. The writer’s questions about sequence, pacing, and emphasis allow her to imagine the expectations of her specialized audience. As the writer considers *where* she is taking her readers and *how* to best guide them to her meaning, she must clarify her own particular intervention. In this way, mapping enables the writer to gain authorial distance and locate critical points of emphasis for her readers. As I’ve seen, many writers continue to use strategies developed in their initial mapping session to conceptualize and articulate key choices they make as they work through subsequent dissertation sections. They also develop their own forms of mapping, using whiteboards, putting multi-colored Post-It notes or construction paper on walls or desks, or spreading notes out on the office floor. They often bring their maps to individual meetings or ask me to visit their offices to “walk through” their arguments and writing. Often our discussions return to their maps as they talk through their larger understandings of their projects even as particular sections are completed.

“Telling a story” and “mapping it out” provide ways of temporarily decoupling disciplinary knowledge and rhetorical knowledge so students can see how the writing works as writing. Doctoral students immersed in dissertations can both narrate and observe the effects of new arrangements while developing a keener sense of audience. Moreover, as they figure out how to present their ideas, they also figure out the ideas themselves. In this way, the focus on writing itself, through the interventions of an experienced generalist writing consultant, provides ways for dissertation writers to connect to their projects with renewed vision and purpose.