

Teaching guide: narrative

An introduction to narrative theory

The aims of this document are to:

- introduce the idea of narratology and show how it can be used to analyse media products
- define key theories for study and terminology to be used in media analysis
- identify how narrative can be used to help understand the meaning created by the close study products.

There are some specific narrative ideas that need to be understood by both AS and A-level students. Narrative is part of the Media Language aspect of the theoretical framework. The enabling ideas that need to be studied are identified in the specification as:

AS	A-level (including AS content)
<p>Narratology:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • narrative codes • narration • diegesis • quest narrative • 'character types' • causality • plot • masterplot. <p>Todorov's ideas and theories on narratology:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • narrative structure • equilibrium • disruption • new equilibrium. 	<p>Lévi-Strauss' ideas and theories on structuralism:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • binary oppositions • mytheme • cultural codes • ideological reading • deconstruction.

Narratology or narrative theory is the study of the way stories are structured. All media products tell stories in some way – some are more obviously telling stories such as TV dramas or the stories in newspapers. Others are less obvious, such as the stories used in advertising products or on the front page of a magazine.

There are several elements to the way we consider stories in media products.

- **The master plot** – the most basic over view of events.
- **The plot** – the content of a story – what happens.
- **Narration** – the telling of the story.

- **Diegesis** – the act of telling a story through narration.
- **Mimesis** – the act of telling a story by showing (via representations).
- **Narrative codes** – the media language used to tell the story.
- **Narrative** – the structure of the story.

Most stories follow a similar narrative structure. Todorov identified a three-part structure for narrative that is common across many media forms and genres.

Three-part structure for narrative

One - narratives begin with an equilibrium

This is where we see the 'norms' of the world of the narrative. The norms will depend on the genre and/or the form being studied. For example:

Form/Genre/Media product	Equilibrium
Soap operas	Family life goes on as normal.
Sci Fi	People live on space ships that travel from planet to planet.
Washing powder advert	A happy family all have clean clothes!
<i>The Missing</i>	A family is shown to be on holiday and happy.

Some media products spend a very short amount of time setting up the equilibrium. This can be down to practical considerations such as time (eg in advertising) or because it's assumed the audience will want to move on to the next stage of the narrative as soon as possible. On the other hand, an extended equilibrium can help introduce characters and situations to the audience before the equilibrium is disrupted.

Two – something happens to disrupt the equilibrium

The disruptions will usually be appropriate to the genre.

Form/Genre/Media product	Disruption
Soap operas	The family have an argument with their neighbours.
Sci Fi	An alien ship attacks and invades a space ship full of human travelers.
Washing powder advert	The family have been out hiking and their clothes are dirty.
<i>The Missing</i>	The family's only child goes missing.

The disruption creates conflicts and problems that need to be solved and this is the heart of any story. Without disruption, there would be no story to tell.

Stories can contain multiple disruptions and many conventional narratives work on a series of complications that come from the initial disruption. A long-form TV drama

will add complication after complication to the story for many hours while an advert will move quickly from the complication to the next stage in the narrative.

Many of the problems within a narrative are centred around a binary opposition (Levi Strauss) that is in conflict. Solving the problems becomes aim of the narrative. The problems define a quest.

Form/Genre/Media product	Binary opposition	Quest
Soap operas	Happy and contented domestic life.	To solve the dispute between the neighbours.
Sci Fi	Aliens vs humans. Freedom vs capture.	To defeat the aliens.
Washing powder advert	Dirty vs clean.	To have clean clothes again.
<i>The Missing</i>	A whole family vs a disrupted family. Mystery vs knowledge Police vs crime/criminal.	To find out what happened to the child.

Stories use a range of characters to play roles within the narrative. These characters may be given personality traits within the plot of the story but as far as the narrative is concerned, they are there to undertake a specific role within the structure of the story. Propp used terms from fairy-tales to identify some of the most important roles in a narrative. Propp argued that these roles appear in some way in all stories. They include:

- the hero – the person on a quest to solve the problems, resolve the disruption
- the villain – the person who tried to block the heroes progress in his quest
- the dispatcher – the person who sends the hero on his quest
- the helper – the person who helps the hero during his quest
- the donor – the person who helps the hero by sacrificing something on the hero's behalf
- the damsel in distress – the person who needs saving to help resolve the narrative
- the princess – the person who becomes a prize for the hero.

Each of these characters plays a very specific role within the logic of the narrative and helps create and/or resolve problems. The events of the narrative and the characters need to act in a way that makes sense within the story and so cause and effect chains are often set up to ensure the events depicted make sense to the audience. Causality is important in the development of the problems within the narrative as well as getting the story to the final stage of the narrative.

Three – problems are solved

We return to a new equilibrium. This may not be exactly the same as the original as the disruption and complications may have altered the world of the story. How problems are solved and the type of new equilibrium we experience again depends on the type of media product.

Form/Genre/Media product	New equilibrium
Soap operas	The problem is solved and the neighbours make up by having a night out in the local pub.
Sci Fi	The space travellers work together to mend the ship and defeat the aliens before continuing with their journey.
Washing powder advert	After using the washing powder, the clothes are clean again.
<i>The Missing</i>	The family discovers what happened to the child.

Narrative and ideology

The act of **deconstructing** narrative structures helps us understand how a story has been constructed but it can also help show how stories are, in themselves, **ideological**. Narratives are constructed using **cultural codes** that reflect the era of production and its values. The codes used in narratives need to make sense to those accessing the story. To help create audience appeal the codes will often reflect the dominant ideologies and values of the time.

One way to make an ideological reading of the narrative is to deconstruct the binary oppositions used to tell the story. Narratives work on the conflict created between binaries and the resolution of these conflicts often demonstrates an ideological position.

For example, a common crime drama conflict will be centred on the conflict between an investigator and a criminal. The investigator seeks to solve the crime and bring the criminal to justice whilst the criminal tries to cover their tracks and avoid capture. The two opposing 'quests' will create problems and complications that keep the audience engaged with the story. The criminal's ingenuity may mean that the investigator follows false leads making the audience wonder if the criminal will escape without punishment. However, the determination and logic of the investigator can be used to thwart the criminal's plans and lead the audience to feel that the mystery can and will be solved.

In a conventional crime drama, the outcome of these conflicts usually ends in order being restored with the mystery being solved and the criminal being punished. This reassuring narrative resolution creates ideological meaning where crime does not pay, bad guys get punished and the winner represents ideas of honesty, hard work and, importantly, law and order – all ideas that are valued in our culture.

Deconstructing the binaries involves looking at the two sides of the conflict and working out which side is shown as 'better', 'right' or 'normal'. Often these values will reflect the dominant ideologies of the producing culture. The small units of the narratives (the **mythemes**) work together to feed into and reinforce the myths and belief systems of the culture.

Exam techniques

Knowing how narrative works is important, but it is also important to practice applying the theoretical ideas to show how narrative works in the close study products (CSPs) being studied for the exams. The exam may ask for examples to show how each

product has structured their narrative and how character roles have been used. These examples should be detailed and specific.

CSPs and narratology

Narrative theories should be used to analyse all in-depth CSPs as well as the targeted CSPs that are assessed via the media language and representation elements of the theoretical framework.

Activity one

Select a television programme you are familiar with and identify characters that fulfil specific narrative roles.

TV show:	
Character role	Character name
Hero	
Villain	
Donor/helper	
Princess/damsel in distress	

Activity two

Deconstruct the binary oppositions used in the Pepsi advert starring Kendall Jenner that was released in 2017.

- What conflict is in the advert?
- What is Kendall Jenner's narrative role in the advert?
- How is a new equilibrium created?

Some people found the message communicated in this advert offensive. Use this deconstruction of the narrative to explain why.