

ELEMENTS OF STORYTELLING IN STUDENT ESSAYS

ANDREI SHATILOV

University of Saint Petersburg

ashatilov2@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-3865-0802

ABSTRACT

Using the example of essays by first-year students of the Faculty of Sociology, SPbSU, written as part of the assignments in the course “Russian Language and Culture of Speech” in 2023, the author analyzes the elements of storytelling encountered in their work. It is noted that in general students have an idea of composition, plot, characters, development of action, etc., but often they do not clearly understand the specifics of the narrative, cannot always maintain a style, cannot create a structured and logically coherent text. Dramatic, even tragic situations are used to add greater expressiveness; characters move freely in time and space; most often an internal conflict is used to develop the action; less popular are the struggle of motives and the clash with their own conscience; external conflicts (confrontation with family) are isolated. A common shortcoming of many essays is the plot and structural incompleteness, when there is no logical or compositional point that would complete the narrative.

KEYWORDS: storytelling, written texts, composition, structure, critical thinking.

ELEMENTS DE LA NARRACIÓ DE HISTÒRIES EN ASSAIGS D'ALUMNES

RESUM

A partir de l'exemple dels assaigs d'estudiants de primer curs de la Facultat de Sociologia, SPbSU, escrits com a part dels treballs del curs «Llengua i cultura de la parla russa» l'any 2023, l'autor analitza els elements de narració que es troben en el seu treball. S'observa que en general els alumnes tenen una idea de composició, trama, personatges, desenvolupament de l'acció, etc., però sovint no entenen clarament les especificitats de la narració, no sempre poden mantenir un estil, no poden crear una estructura estructurada i lògicament coherent. text. S'utilitzen situacions dramàtiques, fins i tot tràgiques per afegir una major expressivitat; els personatges es mouen lliurement en el temps i l'espai; la majoria de les vegades s'utilitza un conflicte intern per desenvolupar l'acció; menys populars són la lluita de motius i el xoc amb la pròpia consciència; els conflictes externs (enfrontament amb la família) estan aïllats. Una mancança habitual de molts assaigs és la incompletitud argumental i estructural, quan no hi ha cap punt lògic o compositiu que completi la narració.

PARAULES CLAU: narració, textos escrits, composició, estructura, pensament crític.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of “storytelling” emerged in the early 1990s thanks to David Armstrong, head of Armstrong International, who came up with the theory of *management by storytelling*. In 1992, Armstrong published the book *MBSA: Managing by Storying Around*, which was the first time the term “storytelling”

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sounded (Armstrong 1992). He found the key to success in the following psychological factor. Stories are easier to comprehend: they are more expressive, engaging, interesting and easier to associate with personal experience than logical and dry arguments. After listening to you, he begins to trust you. And it becomes much easier for you to convince him of something or motivate him to do something. Since the early 90's, storytelling has turned from an auxiliary exercise in developing writing and speaking skills into a powerful business tool: hundreds of firms and companies, advertising agencies and marketing services spend huge money on creating and promoting their goods using storytelling.

In brief, this technology can be described as follows. To sell a product, the customer must be interested in it. Most often, advertising focuses on its quality, appearance, ease of use, etc., i.e., on consumer properties. But it is very difficult to find something new to describe, so more advanced firms began not just to describe the product or service, but to come up with some kind of story associated with this product. As a result, the customer is "bought" not by the consumer properties of the product, but by the interesting stories associated with it. For example, in a British bakery commercial, the main character is going through significant historical events (suffragist march in 19th century, World War I, the Titanic catastrophe, WW2, etc.) in order to finally come home with the bread (New Hovis ad depicting the last 122 years, 2007).

By experiencing the hero and empathizing with him, the customer will be more willing to buy this product, which brings tangible financial benefits to the manufacturing firm.

In John Walsh's book, *Art of Storytelling: Easy Steps to Presenting an Unforgettable Story*, he describes his personal experience of creating and telling a story (Walsh 2013). John Walsh is the founder of BibleTelling and the Christian Storytelling Conference. His network of BibleTelling trainers conduct seminars in the US as well as 21 other countries. The most exciting seminar is the annual BibleTelling Seminar in Israel. Those who attend tell 120 stories of the Bible at the 45 locations where they happened. The *Art of Storytelling* was first published in 2003, and then republished in 2014. His book, *All the Stories of the Bible* is used worldwide by missionaries, pastors, and other Christian workers. John shares his Bible stories on a 2-minute daily radio spot called *All the Stories of the Bible in a Year* and a 4-minute weekly radio spot called *Telling the Stories of the Bible*. He explained 14 steps to make a good story:

1. Select the story
2. Push through the story
3. Envision the scene with present-day feelings and concerns
4. Tell the story from the view of someone at the scene
5. Establish the story central truth
6. Find a memory hook
7. Tell a story within a story
8. Plan your first words
9. Know how the story ends

10. Research the facts
11. Eliminate needless details
12. Add description to the story
13. Include audience participation
14. Arrange practice audiences
15. (Walsh 2013: 13-14)

In 2006, the *Harvard Business Review* named storytelling one of the best business ideas. The idea was:

The best way to make a report or presentation and convey knowledge is to tell a story. From that moment on, the word “storytelling” firmly entered the business environment and became an integral part of modern marketing strategies. (*Harvard Business Review* 2006)

The very idea of “writing” or “story” as a form of storytelling arose a long time ago, even in the preliterate era. The folklore of many countries around the world confirms that oral speech in the form of stories is widespread in the world. This form has its own canons and rules, traditions and plots (Propp 1998, Sokolov 2023, Anikin 2007).

The classic story scenario includes several obligatory elements. You can see them in the following diagram:



SCHEME 1. Story scenario (Neiros 2021)

In this scheme we can see elements borrowed from literary studies (protagonist, plot, narrative structure, plot, conflict, rising action, crisis and climax, descending action, denouement), from rhetoric (purpose, ideas, call to action), from advertising and business (content).

2. METHODS

Students of the course *Russian language and culture of speech* (Faculty of Sociology, 1st year) are offered a choice of three story beginnings:

Malvina tried several times to leave Pinocchio.

She loved New York, vanilla coffee and morning runs.

At the end of November, a St. Petersburg-Warsaw railroad train was approaching the platform in a thaw.

Genre, style, and form were not regulated. The only restriction was the length of no more than two pages. Students, as a rule, very eagerly perform this task. They are attracted by the opportunity to feel like an essayist. The purpose of this assignment is to test whether students can independently create an interesting and entertaining story without the help of modern technology. In total we got 83 essays.

3. DISCUSSION

The first point is *ideas*. There are very few original ideas. The first theme mainly describes various variants of the development of the relationship between the characters, and most often these variants are pessimistic. In the second theme, the central ideas are achieving a goal: moving to America or, if the heroine already lives there, changes in her life. The central idea in the third theme is returning home or fleeing from misfortune or drama. The most frequent genre in all the themes is drama or melodrama.

Characters: already the beginning of the stories provides a guide for creating characters or directly points to them. The first story has a clear indication of the characters, the second has an indefinite “she” and the third has none. Note that the last phrase is taken from the beginning of Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot*.

In the first story, the two characters are constantly in a state of interdependence, a painful one at that. Quote: “The girl wishes to rule and direct everything that happens around her, and the naughty Pinocchio, who resists her will, further ‘binds’ her to herself, becoming an unattainable but desirable goal for her”.

Эта девочка желает управлять и руководить всем, что происходит вокруг неё, а непослушный Буратино, противящийся её воле, ещё больше “привязывает” её к себе, становится недостижимой, но желанной целью для неё.

Malvina wants to, but cannot leave Pinocchio, and he does not want to change. More often than not, it is Malvina who takes the active position: she tries to talk to him, get him to change his way of life, and in the end, she leaves, goes to another town, finds a job, gets a dog, etc. Pinocchio is left alone, goes down, starts drinking, and dies of alcohol poisoning (in the worst-case scenario). In

another case, Malvina cannot survive Pinocchio's betrayal and quits her life. It is extremely rare for the characters to maintain their relationship: Pinocchio earns money, Malvina becomes a psychologist, they buy a house in Spain and have three children. Students, in my opinion, project their own life experiences onto fictional characters, trying to "play out" possible scenarios for their own lives.

The second story offers a central character that is seen by students as follows: she is rich, lives in Manhattan, works for a famous design or marketing agency, runs a blog, looks gorgeous, plays sports, i.e., she embodies the absolute ideal of any girl. How she achieved all this remains unknown, sometimes rich parents or a prestigious university are mentioned. At the opposite pole of the story is the other protagonist: she lives in a communal apartment, drinks instant Nescafe in the morning, works in an office, reads successful people's blogs, dreams of losing weight, getting rich and marrying a well-mannered man. Quote: "I'll get my strength, and begin my journey. I will definitely start. I will, very soon. I'll finish watching the last episode and write down my goals for the month. Better yet, tomorrow, with a clear head".

Вот наберусь сил, и начну свой путь. Обязательно начну. Совсем скоро. Последнюю серию досмотрю и пропишу цели на месяц. А лучше завтра, на свежую голову.

In the third story, the heroes are lovers who either date or break up. Another category of characters are those disappointed in life, running from trouble and unhappy love. The characters' experiences look like this: "Again and again, I fell into the depths of my bottomless consciousness, into the dark abysses of my brain; or like this: Andrew reflected on his life and realized that he had missed many opportunities to enjoy life because of his moping".

Снова и снова, я падал в глубины своего бездонного сознания, в темные пропасти моего мозга; Андрей задумался о своей жизни и понял, что он упустил много возможностей наслаждаться жизнью из-за своей хандры.

Students apparently lack the life experience and means of expression to describe the inner world of the characters, so they prefer to do so through outward appearances or actions, which was characteristic of early 19th century Russian prose. Extremely rarely is the psychological or emotional state of the characters conveyed more or less adequately.

The romantic verbal portrait lacks (or is weakened) realistic concreteness and detail. It most often has not a plastic, but a generalized and poetic character, strives to convey only a general impression of a person's appearance... (Umanskaya 1971: 118)

Points three, four and thirteen can be omitted, since they concern advertising texts. Point five: *plot*. Unlike ideas, things are better with stories. Along with the usual and understandable options, such as moving to another country or another city, parting or meeting with family, an unexpected acquaintance, fatal illness or death, there are also more rare options, for example,

the heroine, disappointed in life, drank all the vanilla raff in Starbucks and drowned herself; Selena, head of the gang, a killer, destroyed an object at a presentation (the movie "Ghost in the Armor"); an elderly captain ordered the murder of his neighbour, who annoyed him with her vanilla coffee and the slamming of the front door in the morning; Catherine, working as a security inspector in New York City in 2123 in the total surveillance system to maintain public order "Themis", returns home to her cat Davis after arresting another criminal (the movie "Judge Dradd"); unknown forces destroy people with powerful sound waves. Interestingly, there is little contemporary influence in the stories – no advanced technology, no social networks, no Smartphone's, no neural networks and no artificial intelligence. Oddly enough, the cultural background that school leavers should undoubtedly have does not show up in their work in any way. Only one essay, whose heroine lives above a bookstore and dreams of becoming a writer, mentions such works as Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*, Janet Fitch's *White Oleander*, Henry James' *Daisy Miller*, Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Night*.

The next point is *narrative structure*. "The system of characters' speech structures in their relationship to the narrator, narrator, or narrators constitutes the structure of the narrative or narrative structure" (*The structure of the narrative*, 2023). This includes such elements as point of view, the subject of speech, and the type of narrative. If the narrative expresses the author's point of view, it remains uniplanar and objective. In this case, the narrator or storyteller informs the reader about events, describes objects or phenomena, depicts, evaluates, etc. A character's point of view is also possible, and then the narrative takes on a subjective character. The structure of the narrative is based on the distinction of the author of the work, the narrator and the characters, each of which has its own "voice". Most often the author, narrator, and hero appear in unity; students do not yet know how to separate "voices" and use such means of expression for speech characteristics of past characters that could not be. For example, in one story the author mentions merchants, galoshes, a bus, and Moscow State University. In another story, a 6-year-old boy reasons as follows: "What is beauty? – Suddenly the boy is thinking. – Perhaps beauty is a spontaneous combination of a certain phenomenon and always unchanging – the human soul. And maybe not only the human soul. Vaska, I wish I knew how you understand beauty ... Someday let me know about it, okay, my friend?"

Что же такое красота? – вдруг задумался мальчик. – Пожалуй, красота есть спонтанное соединение некоего явления и всегда неизменного – человеческой души. Авось и не только человеческой. Васька, вот бы знать, как ты понимаешь красоту... Когда-нибудь дай знать об этом, хорошо, дружок?

The desire to express as beautifully as possible gives rise to a stream of falsely-expressive images that violate the laws of combination and semantics of words, for example, "All prefer a flattering lie, but in the false light of the sun no

seed will bloom, and therefore no fruit will rise. And without a harvest the nation will perish”.

Все предпочитают лестную ложь, но в фальшивом свете солнца не распустится ни одно семя, а значит, не взойдет ни один плод. А без урожая нация погибнет.

The banality of the thought is compensated by the pathetic words about the false sun and the death of the nation – what nation, from what, why the death – remains unclear.

Now we turn to the *composition of the story*. Every story begins with a *beginning*, i.e., an event that triggers the development. The most popular variant in essays is an unexpected meeting of the characters (in a cafe, on a jog, in the library), an epiphany or enlightenment that comes as a result of mental experience, some act of another person that led to a change of heart, an escape from the old life, a move to another city or another country, etc. As we can see, the setting is conditioned by both external circumstances and internal factors. Sometimes there are works in which there is no clearly marked structure, there is a flow of images, impressions and thoughts. Such essays do not meet the criteria of a narrative, since they do not have heroes, conflict, plot development, etc. They account for approximately 20 % of the total number of works. In the majority of essays, the necessary elements of structure can be found. The driving force behind any narrative is *conflict* – the confrontation or opposition of two or more characters. The struggle of opposites provides the necessary degree of influence on the reader, allows following the development of the plot, to make assumptions about the denouement. The conflict provides the interrelation of opposing images, the correct and harmonious construction of the composition. It can be external, when the characters struggle with external circumstances, and internal, which is divided into the following types: a struggle of motives, when the hero is at the mercy of multidirectional desires and wishes, the clash of characters with their own conscience, when the hero commits acts contrary to his moral convictions, the experience of treason, an internal crisis due to low self-esteem and existential crisis (*Conflict in Literary Works*, 2023).

The main place in the compositions of students is occupied by internal conflicts (disappointment in life, experience of infidelity, low self-esteem), less popular are the struggle of motives and the clash with his own conscience), single external conflicts (confrontation with the family). For example, Malvina left Pinocchio, wanted to say goodbye, but he died in her arms from alcohol poisoning, she could not forgive herself: Since then, Malvina lives with pain in her soul, trying to forget the past, but every time she recalls Pinocchio, she plunges into a world of grief and sorrow.

С тех пор Мальвина живет с болью в душе, пытаясь забыть прошлое, но каждый раз, когда она вспоминает Буратино, она погружается в мир горя и скорби.

Another story describes the life of a princess: “A daughter, an heiress, an object of adoration – how she was in the light of the footlights and in the eyes of her entourage. A whipping doll, a pacifier, a silent body – what She was in the harsh reality and where She was supposed to be safe. She was praised only for her silly, beautiful shell, and they never wondered what was inside her”.

Дочь, наследница, объект обожания — то, какой Она была при свете софитов и в глазах окружения. Кукла для битья, пустышка, безмолвное тело — то, какой Она была в жестокой реальности и там, где, по идее, должна была быть в безопасности. Ее хвалили лишь за глупую красивую оболочку и никогда не интересовались, что же у Нее внутри.

The plot is followed by *increasing action*. In fiction, it is the development of the characters, their formation, dramatic changes in the inner world, psychology, rather than external circumstances, serve as a driving force and arouse the interest of readers. This is how significant works of Russian and world literature are built. If the characters of a novel do not change internally, then such literature cannot be considered talented. In good works one can see how events develop, how characters change, how new circumstances and situations arise, and how characters react to this. However, in most works the action stops – young people meet, sympathy arises, then love and then either life together or a dramatic parting, that is, the external conditions change, but not the inner world of the characters.

The escalating action leads to a *climax or denouement*, which is a way of resolving the accumulated problems. Students quite often use “potent” methods of denouement, in the form of fatal illness, death or suicide of characters, believing that the effect of such a technique will be stronger. In reality, dramas and even tragedies in life take place quite routinely, without theatrical effects, explosions, or disasters, as Chekhov demonstrated perfectly. Rarely has a writer been able to fully comply with the principle of *downward action*, where the character continues to change, but after the experience. More often the character freezes at the point of climax and the action stops.

A common shortcoming of many essays is the plot and structural incompleteness when there is no logical or compositional point that completes the narrative. It ends abruptly, leaving the reader perplexed as to the fate of the characters. This is not an open ending, where the reader is invited to think of a sequel, but rather an unmotivated ending. The simplest, but most effective method of ending is when the first and last phrases of the story echo, creating a kind of frame within which the text is placed. However, more interesting is such an ending, which logically follows from the entire narrative, that is, in addition to the criterion of coherence of the text, it is necessary to observe the criterion of integrity – the substantial and structural exhaustion of the created text. Text cohesion is a linguistic category, and wholeness is psycholinguistic.

The condition for the integral perception of the text turns out to be that a person must perceive textual information in accordance with a real or typical situation. (Glazkov 2021: 6)

In this case, the text is perceived as an indivisible unity, as a holistic entity. The lack of wholeness is perceived as incompleteness.

Now we offer an example of a short story illustrating student's skills:

Over four years Vladimir worked in an old office on the outskirts of Moscow. All his days were similar to each other, nothing changed - the same gray streets, full of garbage cans and crowds of people. But then one day at a bus stop in the crowd of people he noticed an unusual girl. She had gorgeous long hair and an unusual inscription on her backpack. The inscription says: "She loved New York, vanilla coffee and morning runs." He decided it was a sign and that he owed it to himself to meet this girl. Despite all his shyness, he approached her and struck up a conversation. She was a very pleasant person who he didn't want to say goodbye to, but she was late for school and he had to let her go, but he still asked for her phone number. He thought about her for a couple of days and after three days he decided to call her. They chatted for a long time, and he decided to find out why she had chosen the backpack with that particular inscription. The answer, however, was not as romantic as he had imagined, she said: "I didn't pick it, I just stole it, but in general I like New York, too, though I drink whiskey instead of coffee and prefer to smoke heavy tobacco instead of jogging."

На протяжении 4-х лет Владимир работал в старом офисе на окраине Москвы. Все его дни были похожи друг на друга, ничего не менялось - всё те же серые улочки, полные урны и толпы людей. Но вот однажды на автобусной остановке в толпе людей он заметил необычную девушку. У неё были роскошные длинные волосы и необычная надпись на рюкзаке. Надпись гласила: «Она любила Нью-Йорк, ванильный кофе и утренние пробежки». Он решил, что это знак и что он обязан познакомиться с этой девушкой. Несмотря на всю свою застенчивость, он подошёл к ней и завёл разговор. Девушка оказалась весьма приятным собеседником, с которым не хотелось прощаться, однако она опаздывала на учёбу, и ему пришлось её отпустить, но номер её телефона он всё же спросил. Несколько дней он думал об этой девушке и спустя 3 дня он всё-таки решился ей позвонить. Они долго болтали, и он решил узнать, почему рюкзак именно с этой надписью она выбрала. Однако ответ оказался не столь романтичным, как он представлял, она сказала: «А я и не выбирала, я просто его спёрла, но вообще мне тоже нравится Нью-Йорк, правда вместо кофе я пью виски, а вместо пробежек предпочитаю курить тяжёлый табак».

4. CONCLUSION

Thus, we analyzed the elements of storytelling that students use when writing their papers and came to the following conclusions: students in general intuitively use the scheme of creating a written fiction text - they choose the characters, determine the plot, describe the conflict, lead the action to the denouement, and try to convey psychological characteristics. At the same time,

these essays lack action logic and motivation for the characters' actions; there is insufficient mastery of the stylistic means of language and the emotions and inner world of the characters are described through external physical manifestations. The most frequent genre of works is melodrama and drama, almost no detectives and other genres. Not noticeable influence of modern realities, few references to literature and art.

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