Dream of Travel Writing

Story Structure to Take Your Travel Feature Articles to the Next Level

We're going to be talking about something that I really, really love, which is story structure. This is something that I really like to talk to travel writers about because so many travel writers have come from other walks of life. Perhaps you've come from other parts of the travel agency or system or you come from education. I myself used to be at a university in the office for sending students abroad for internships, and some of you have absolutely no travel connection at all and no literary connection.

This is something that a lot of us get into having our own blogs and learning about web writing and learning about WordPress, but we don't build these fundamental building blocks of putting a story together, but the beautiful thing is that once you know them you're never going to forget them and it's going to make writing your stories so much faster. So that's why I'm really excited to talk to you about that today.

Specifically, a couple of things that we are going to talk about is what is a story arc? What is a narrative, another name for it? What does it all mean? What is a story in the first place? In particular, how do we take these fiction constructs of what a story is and put in into the things that have happened to us in our life, in our trips?

Specifically we're going to look at some ways that those play out in travel articles as opposed to how they play out in other story settings. So often when you hear "story," you think that means fiction, and there's a whole beautiful world of writing and analysis and also literary journals around this concept of the non-fiction narrative, which is what we're talking about today: Taking a narrative structure and putting it on something real, that has happened in real life that has sprung up.

The thing about non-fiction narrative is that a lot of things that have been popular stories throughout the decades and millennia are inherently non-fiction narratives, even if they've taken on a certain veneer of fiction just through their popularity. With conferences, I really recommend if you have a choice, if you're going to just one conference in a given year, don't necessarily just look at going to a travel blogging event where you're going to meet other travel bloggers or travel writers. Send yourself for education purposes to a writing conference, especially to a non-fiction writing conference. It'll just blow your mind how much you will learn. I've started going to these in the last couple years working on writing books and it's just a constant help to me and also to the people that I pass this on to who are learning these structures.

Dream of Travel Writing

Story Structure to Take Your Travel Feature Articles to the Next Level

We're going to talk about the general structures as well as how they work in the travel world, then I'm going to give you a couple specific ones for different travel article settings as well as different travel articles that you can take home and use on your own work going forward.

In terms of this story structure that we're going to talk about today, like I said, I've really devoted a lot of time to this. I think it was about two and a half years ago I took kind of a professional sabbatical after having been working as a freelance travel writer for five years, and I took a couple months to just wholly study story structure in travel writing, specially in book-length form, but also in shorter functions and I basically gave myself an MFA. I read tons and tons of stuff from all sorts of great writing academy-type sources in terms of the non-fiction, as in people talking about how to do this stuff. I read all these books, so I really am bringing to you guys something that for a while wasn't exactly a hobby, but a personal thing that I was doing on the side for several years to really dive into how story structure works in the travel writing setting specifically. That's why I'm so excited to talk to you about this today.

Like I said, before we dive into the specific structures that we can use for travel writing, its really important that we all get on the same page about the concept of narrative, about the concept of the story arc. First of all, it would be really helpful for me to know how much experience you have with the concept of narrative.

I had to take some time off from my journalism so to say and really study this. Because even if you have been a journalist working in a newsroom or even if you've gone through journalism school, there's a lot of things that you study around research, getting sources, details, how to put those things together, but you don't necessarily look at the story structure because it's thought of as something that you only need for longer pieces or it's not journalism; journalism and fiction are absolutely different, right?

That's where this whole world of non-fiction narrative comes in. So there's a bunch of you on the call today that do have a background in fiction, which is great. So it seems like we're split kind of through the middle and that's great to know. I know some of you I've chatted with in the past and you have some pretty robust background in this type of writing, but just for the sake of everybody getting on the same page, I'm going to go through some different story structures here as well.

For those of you who do have this type of background, this is probably going to be a bit familiar to you, but I'm going to talk about some of the pitfalls of applying these structures in

the non-fiction, specifically travel, specifically feature, setting. So hopefully even this part where I'm going over the story structures will be informative for you guys a s well.

Maria (I'm not sure which Maria this is) and someone said they just read Story Craft by Jack Hart and this also came up at a retreat that we ran recently. I believe Story Craft was the new one that just came out. I have another one that I think is called the Story Bible and there are a couple things like this that are really, really great, but Story Craft is highly recommended. The one that I have is kind of like a workbook and it's 8.5×11 size, but it's about 2 inches thick, even at that print size, and he literally goes through every single page of your book—because this is for book-length things—what should happen in terms of the character being afraid or surprised or meeting this person.

It's not unusual in the world of book-length writing for there to be these very specific guides. I have a writing friend from writing conferences who is a professional romance book writer – she also writes some other things – but in romance there's all these ridiculous guidelines. Like if the main female protagonist hasn't kissed the male protagonist by *this* page, that's not ok. And it's down to the page; it's not just about arcs.

Someone's asking what's the name of the book I have on story, but I'm going to have to look it up, because I'm talking to you from a hotel in London right now and it's in the library at the retreat house, so I'm going to have to check on that when I get home and I'll mention it in the newsletter or on the blog somewhere because I just don't know off the top of my head.

Story Craft, though, that Maria mentioned, she has a journalism background, she has an MA in journalism, and she is working on a really cool book right now and she said "This is a really great resource if you have a journalism background and you're transforming into narrative non-fiction." And I totally agree. I've read some really great reviews of that as well.

We're talking about these fiction archetypes, right? And how they translate into travel features. One of the things I did in preparation for this call, I always do, even if it's something I know well, I always go out before the webinars and do some research and try to pick up some tips for you guys that I don't already know or see the way that other people are teaching it. And something that I did this past week was to look for blog posts, anything, really, on how to write travel features.

I know this is a question I really get a lot from you guys. Even from people like several of you I see on the call today that have really robust writing backgrounds. The questions is how

to translate that to this 1500 word journalistic but narrative format. I was actually really surprised at the dearth of information that was very structural and informational and procedural about how to go about that. I guess I shouldn't be 100 percent surprised because the whole reason we started this enterprise of Dream of Travel Writing in the first place is that people aren't out there telling you exactly how to do these things. But I pulled a couple, let's call them key phrases, from some of the resources that I cam across that I found interesting. This is in the realm of how to write a travel feature article.

Some of them you'll see here are deceptively simple. They seem like they should be correct, but this the extent of the direction. Here's one: Develop your story thematically or chronologically, but keep it moving.

Now, I feel like the concept of developing a story thematically is so obtuse, like trying to think of how to put together a story thematically that's feature length and have it be interesting without having it be a round-up, I just see the reader losing interest. Chronologically can also be a problem and we're going to get to that in a little bit.

"But keep it moving." This seems like the kind of direction that you get from an editor that wants rewrites and you're like "What does that mean? I don't know how to do that." And you know right away that whatever rewrite you send her, she's going to send you back because it doesn't make sense.

Like I said, "keep it moving." That's the kind of thing an editor might say to you and you're like, "Oh my God I have absolutely no idea how to interpret that direction."

Another one we're going to talk about, I have a whole slide just on endings because that is a question that I both get and don't get because I think a lot of people don't get to the ending because they get scared along the way, but like I said, we're going to talk more about endings.

I just love this little bit of direction: "End with a lesson or a discovery or a personal transformation." Like they said, "End with it," but not how to get there in the first place. And that's one of the things we're going to talk quite a bit about because that's really the whole point of this structure. And just ending with a lesson is actually one of the biggest faux pas that you can do because it makes your story not ring true.

Dream of Travel Writing

Story Structure to Take Your Travel Feature Articles to the Next Level

Now, this one I really loved: “A feature writer for a travel magazine, or, say for your own blog, is in the business of selling one thing and one thing only: fantasy.” Now this is kind of akin to this concept of armchair travel, that you’re writing a story that is not necessarily replicable by anyone else. But the whole problem I have with this is that “fantasy” is actually a tough sell. If you think about “fantasy-oriented television shows or fantasy-oriented books, they tend to be things that are known for having a cult status, but not necessarily a wide appeal.

One of the best things that you can do with your feature writing, with your narrative and long-form writing, is to make it universally applicable. I actually don’t have this quote on any of my slides, so I’ll just say it now, but one of my favorite quotes about this type of writing if from Maya Angelo and the essence of it is that nobody remembers what you tell them; they only remember how you make them feel. So if you think of nothing else in terms of story, just always keep that in mind. “Is this bit in my narrative making somebody feel something?” We’re going to get into how to do that.

This last quote, for those of you listening in by phone, “You’re first job is to decide on the particular story you want to tell and the events that make up that story.”

Now this I got in here not in a joking way, but because it’s so important. So many people sit down with a whole boatload of research and their trip in their head to try to write a story, but they don’t know which story they want to tell. Let’s look at what I mean by that.

I have a friend who is a documentary filmmaker who teaches, or rather he does talks, on story arcs, and this is the format that he uses. He calls it the “Five C’s.” We’re going to talk about how they don’t typically come in this order in a little bit, but it’s really important for the sake of this narrative arc, story arc, discussion, to understand this framework. He uses Five C’s, and I like these words because they’re really easy to remember.

Those C’s are: The Current State, which is like the status quo, the beginning, how things are before something happens. That something is the Conflict. Conflict, of course, is slightly more complex and we’re going to get to this in a little bit. But there’s a status quo, there’s a Current State, and a Conflict changes that. Then the Conflict goes along and we reach a Climax then the Conflict resolves. The tension dissipates and then we move on to the Consequences of that Climax resolving and the Conclusion.

Story Structure to Take Your Travel Feature Articles to the Next Level

For instance, and we're going to talk about this structure later, but if any of you guys have heard me talk in the past about what I call the Don George Feature Formula, The Don George Feature Formula is all about transformation. So transformation is something that happened on your trip that made you different than you were when you left. That might be that you think differently about a certain group of people or a certain place. It might that you've realized something fundamental about yourself, whatever. But there's some difference between you in the beginning and you at the end. That's a really important part of stories, is that something has changed from its current state. And that's why I really like this Five C description, because we have to make sure that by the end of our feature, by the end of our structure, we haven't just given information, because otherwise it's not a story.

And I just realized really sadly that I had a slide about this and I seem to have cut it out.

This common trope in theatre and film that I hear over and over again when I watch stories on television or in the movies about stories, is this description of plot. Somebody in the film —I just saw this in a film if you want to watch an interesting film about story craft there's something called "Their Finest Hour," it's starring a couple big British actors and it's about propaganda films in one of the world wars, and there's a scene in which they're trying to explain, basically, writing to one of the new writers and the guy says, "She died, and then he died. That's not a plot. She died and then he died…of grief. Now that's a plot."

I've always found that to be a kind of an obtuse definition, but it helps you see this thing, that it can't just be that this happened *and then* this happened*;* There has to be that note of intrigue, that "why" transformation. So it wasn't just that she died of a heart attack and he died of a stroke; it was that she died of a heart attack, he couldn't handle it, his friends couldn't console him, and then one day he just didn't wake up. He had died of grief. So the whole idea there and the way that I've described it is what happens in this conflict stage.

There's an initial conflict, which is often called the "inciting incident," we're going to get into this in all sorts of pictographical representations in a minute, so don't worry about the terms right now because you'll see them again.

There's this initial conflict and then there's several conflicts after it before this climax comes in. Then the consequences and then the conclusion. Let's look at the images, because like I said, it's really important to grasp this, but it looks likes this in the beginning.

Dream of Travel Writing

Story Structure to Take Your Travel Feature Articles to the Next Level

When I first show you, you're like "Aah! What does this mean?" I have a couple different slides with the different representations of the story arc, but the reason I wanted to start with this one is that I feel like it's actually a pretty appropriate representation of what we think when we're like "Oh my god, the concept of story arc! Like all of the things happen and how does that actually make sense?" And I love that little picture here, if you can see it. Right under "Struggles" and "Crisis" there's a person with some little question marks over their head that says, "Is all lost?" and they're in some water with a shark coming along.

This is a very madcap representation of what the story arc looks like, but at its core it's composed of, let's say this shape, but this is really the Current State, this is the Conflict, this is the Climax, this is the Consequences, and this is the Conclusion.

This is the really, really simple trajectory of those five stages that I talked to you about. But here's the thing: As I mentioned, the end has to be different than the beginning. Something has changed, something has transformed. But here's the other thing: If you look at this, or if we go back to this one, it all seems very even, but does the conclusion of the story every really take this long? Of course not.

I was trying to check out this thing on some common stories that have a Hero's Journey – we're going to talk about the concept of the Hero's Journey later – and yesterday I was looking at one of the Hunger Games movies and I was looking at the video and I was checking where certain things happen in the video and one of the things that I noticed is that this scene that seems like it's completely before the action, there haven't even been any major obstacles or major anything yet, happens about 15 minutes before the end of the movie.

The climax didn't even take place until about 10 minutes before the end of the movie, so obviously this resolution—or like we called it before, the Consequences and Conclusion—have been shuffled into a much smaller space. So this kind of starts to represent it, but this image is kind of getting closer to there, where you see that much less than this very even path here of half of it being dedicated to consequences, a much smaller bit of the arc is dedicated to the climax, the consequences, and the conclusion.

But this idea of the three-act structure, which those of you who have a fiction background may have heard before, is still a little obtuse and particularly for travel features, doesn't really reflect the amount of time spent on various things. So I know I'm going through these sides of the different arcs quickly, but it's because I want to get to the one I actually like, so we're looking at all the kind of rejects first. Not that Harry Potter is a reject, but I found this

somewhere, and I know it's really small, but you don't really need to see what's on it, that's not the point, but the idea is that this up and down can happen way more than this one time and especially here, this longer three-act structure, it's going up and down. It's not going directly up the whole time.

Even here, if you look from where the happiness rating starts to where it ends doesn't actually look that different. In fact, it seems like they're quite low a lot of the time. And this is much more common. Most stories don't have this very clear happy little stepping stone where every time the protagonist confronts an obstacle they move up, they move to a happier place. So a very common format that we're going to talk about in travel articles is the idea of a quest. A quest piece.

This makes the transformation bit very easy because you have set out looking for something. And either you find it or you don't. And you find it and you're happy you found it or you're not happy you find it and there's a reason why. But the quest gives your article a structure. And this is something that, when I talked before about having these structural tools at your disposal, makes your writing job so much easier.

Many, many new writers don't try this quest format. But if you look in a lot of magazine articles, there's a preponderance of quests, like a ridiculous number of quests, especially with travel feature books. It seems like almost every travel article is structured as a quest or every travel book is structured as a quest. And there's a reason for that: because it's very easy. It's very simple in terms of figuring out what these obstacles are. Because if you are on a quest you are trying to get something, you're trying to find something, you're trying to achieve something, so that is automatically the climax.

The point of that thing coming to fruition is automatically the climax. It's totally clear, you know what your climax is. In non-fiction and in real life there is absolutely no easier way to find the climax of a story. Because non-fiction is so much messier than fiction it can often be hard to pin point what that climax is, but we're going to do some tricks for it later. But with quests it's so clear.

For instance, there's a really lovely quest piece where one of the frugal travel writers, I believe for the New York Times, had gone to Greece. He's going around Greece, I think he has a car or he just rents cars when he needs them, but he's essentially trying to get from point A to point B on the same trajectory more or less that Ulysses traveled. He's essentially traveling at the whims of the ferry schedule and various Greek islands that wont allow you to get to another island. You have to go via a weigh-point or something like that. So his quest is

to reach this end point, right, this city at the end, but along the way every time he needs to get on a new ferry or it's a new day or he needs to find somewhere to eat or where to sleep in each stop is its own little crisis, its own little obstacle, but they're all feeding into that very clear climax which is reaching his destination.

They don't usually take this stepping stone format. The example I just gave of the New York Times article is a really good example of this. Just because he's gotten to the next island from the island he was on, which only gave him one option of the next island he could go to, doesn't necessarily mean that he's closer to his final destination. It might be the island he just reached similarly only has one other ferry route that he can take and that doesn't take him to an island that allows him to reach his destination. It's not always an upward movement.

The format that I actually like to think of in terms of the visuals for the arc is this: that you start somewhere, you know your current state, your status quo, then something happens. And that something that happens is typically exciting, right? That's when we go up a little bit here. So something happens that's exciting.

You find out about a country that you didn't know existed that's a micro country that's buried in the middle of this country that you're currently an expat in and you decide you must go and see this other country. Then: obstacle! Maybe that obstacle is that despite the fact that there's only a land border, you actually need a visa to go to this exciting micro country and it's a ridiculously onerous process.

Then you surpass the obstacle. You find a way to get the visa, you're going along, you've rented the car, you're driving there and then you get to the border and you're told that rental cars can't pass the border. You aren't allowed and you have to stop. That might be your midpoint obstacle.

Then you're like, "Oh crap, we can't take the rental car. This current trip is scrapped." You have to return the rental car, you go home, you try to figure out a new way to do it. You're able to borrow your friend's car. You're going, you're going, you're going, then something is wrong with the car. Maybe you get in an accident and you are newly an expat in this place, you don't speak the language very well, you absolutely don't know what to do in a traffic accident in this country and here you are with a friend's car that you don't even own and maybe you end up in jail. We're making up a story here, right, so you can go to jail.

Then your friend comes and bails you out and now the friend is driving their car and you get to finally go to the country and then you have some epiphany, we'll talk about those in a minute, the end.

These are the kind of obstacles that can go up and down in a real travel story. But the important part, even though I said, "You have some kind of epiphany. The end," the important part is actually the epiphany; it's not the climax.

Here's the problem with a lot of travel features: you know what your quest was or you know what the climax is, you think, but you don't know what the consequences and the conclusion are. And here's the thing: If you don't know those, you can't know any of this. Including the climax. You can't know any of these other stages because if you don't have a conclusion, a destination, lets call it, for your narrative arc. And the destination for your narrative arc is not going to be the destination that you reach in your story or your quest.

It is the transformation. It is that change from the current state to the conclusion. You have to know what that change is because otherwise the steps that reach the climax and the climax itself aren't supporting the conclusion you're trying to tell. And that's where you get into situations like, "just end with a lesson or a discovery or a personal transformation." That's how you get into these problems that the discovery or lesson or personal transformation feels tacked on at the end if you haven't made sure that all of these obstacles and this climax is actually the one that resolves into the conclusion that you want to put forth. So you need to begin at the end.

Now this often ends up with stories on paper, travel features, that *literally* begin at the end. That the beginning on the page of the article is in fact the end of the trip. There's some ways that we engineer that, like I said, by putting the end of the trip at the beginning of the article.

Let's look at how that works, at some specific structures.

I talked earlier about this concept of the Five C's. And as we've looked at these Five C's in the super simplified version, they do not get correspondingly equal amounts of space in your story. So what actually happens is that you have your Current State, which should be quite small, then most of your story is the Conflict. Then the Climax, Consequences and Conclusion are also quite small. The Conflict, as we looked at as I mentioned on my preferred slide, is actually this whole boatload in the middle of the story. The Conflict has

that inciting incident, which disturbs your status quo and incites you onto this adventure. Then you have obstacle, midpoint, obstacle and finally the climax.

There's a reason I have three things in here apart from the inciting incident, and that's because having not three acts, but three scenes or three moments, is a very easy way to structure your article. It goes back to the story structure we all learned—forget about having an MA or even a PhD in literature—we all of us learned this at the age of 12 when we were taught persuasive writing or how we were taught to write an essay for school, which was that you have a thesis and you have three points that support it and then you have a conclusion. I think people call it a five-paragraph essay.

We need to make sure this rule of three—it psychologically works really well—we need to make sure that each of those points, like in this 5-paragraph essay, truly does support our conclusion, our quest. Then each of these "points" from the 5-paragraph essay becomes a scene, a moment, an obstacle, a portion of your journey that we relay, but they must all relate back to the conclusion of the story itself.

As we talked about, in real life, stories aren't devoted three-fifths to wrap-up. It's really about that middle part.

I'm in the UK and whenever I'm in different countries I always put the television on in the background, not because we don't have television at home, but just because I like having that cultural exposure of what is normal for people in different countries. I do it even in non English-speaking countries where I don't understand what's on the television. But in the background last night there was this "Night at the Museum" movie and it was one where they go to the UK, so it was particularly apropos, and Dan, I think Steven from Downton Abbey, was in it as Sir Lancelot, a very kind of ditsy version of Sir Lancelot..

As they are going through the museum they meet him and, being a knight, he asks them "What is your quest? I will help you with your quest. I am Sir Lancelot. For the glory of Camelot, tell me what your quest is so I can help you." They explain that their quest is that they need to fix this thing so that people don't die. Very simple, typical hero quest.

This whole thing that happened in the movie with the monkey was essentially a sort of story-telling ploy to get Sir Lancelot, who's all about the quest, to say "No, no, no, we can't also go after the monkey, we're going after the tablet. We're trying to save everybody, who cares

about the monkey. You need to stop following the monkey." And then, at the end of the movie, he says, "I see now, it was about the monkey the whole time."

What does that mean? Why was it about the monkey the whole time? Because when the monkey went off to save the little people who got pulled into the air vent, it was the same impulse, it was the same idea, it was about saving the lives of his friends, which was the whole idea of the initial thing, which was fixing this tablet so they don't all die at the end of the night.

What I mean by this ridiculous aside about monkeys is that the monkeys in your story, the asides, the obstacles, absolutely every single one of them strictly and 100 percent needs to tie into the path to the destination and the conclusion. Because if you have a conclusion that seems to anybody to come out of left field, it's happening because your monkeys aren't really related to your conclusion.

Obviously I'm not saying that Night at the Museum 3 or whichever one it is is a great, great work of fiction, the fact that it was on television at whatever o'clock, is a good sign that it's not. But it was a good apropos example of this story technique and where stories often fall flat because these little offshoots, these adventures, these obstacles don't actually relate to the conclusion. And the longer your piece is, whether it's a feature or a full-length book, the more likely you are to have asides, to have obstacles, to have adventures, to have anecdotes, to have scenes that aren't tying back into that conclusion.

Basically, all of the things we don't like about mediocre television – a good friend of mine calls this laundry-folding television, the television shows that you don't actually have to pay attention to every single thing that's happening because the plot is so clear that whenever you tune in or whatever little bits you hear will make sense at the end. All of these lazy television things we don't like we also need to banish from our stories.

One of the main ones is this concept that you need to do acts or you need to get acts in order to do Y which will eventually get you to Z. This is a really big complaint in the fantasy genre, which is that you can't rescue the princess because there's a dragon guarding her and the dragon can only be killed by the Collar of Xenon and to get the Collar of Xenon you have to embark upon this entirely other quest to this other place and all of these other things befall you on the way and you spend 5/7ths of the book just trying to get the Collar of Xenon and was that really necessary? People often attack it in the fiction setting, and they come up a lot in fantasy settings, these adventures to get a physical object that you need to accomplish the goal.

Story Structure to Take Your Travel Feature Articles to the Next Level

How does this work out in travel stories? It's less about these obstacles that don't need to be there so much as background information. I know so many people that follow us and that I've seen at events, a lot of you love the history; you love the back-story. And back-story makes for great stories for us, so it's really good to love that back-story, but here's the thing: It's that a lot of that back-story isn't going to be involved in – I've got to go back to that slide – the particular story that you want to tell in this feature.

With us it's less that we get distracted that we need to get the collar of Xenon and all the things along the way, but it's often more to the lines of history. I was talking at the week-long Freelance Travel Writing Bootcamp about this: someone is working on a guidebook for an entire country and she really loves the history, the *why* of things, and she was having a hard time with the beginning of each chapter where she gives the background of this place and narrowing that down to one column on one page. She was saying, "I get into this history and I don't know how to make it all fit and explain all of it in that little bit."

The thing is that your reader doesn't need to understand. I'm going to use Spain as an example because I bring it up a lot: Your reader doesn't need to understand that in Spain in the 1930's there was a civil war in which all the playwrights and poets and artists were killed in a period of 2-4 days and dumped in a mass grave. They don't need to know all of that to understand modern Spain.

What they do need to understand is what happened after that, which is that the rest of Europe had World War II and democracy and modernity and all these things. Spain bypassed that because of this dictatorship, which started in the 1930's and went all the way to the 1980's, very much like the Soviet Union. You can say that in one sentence without having to give them a play-by-play of all the things that happened in the 1930's, how they finally got out of the dictatorship, exactly how the dictatorship has affected them.

This is the kind of instance that I see come up in a lot of your stories: that needing X to do Y to get Z typically shows up in that background information. We've already talked about this issue of the epiphany that comes out of nowhere to wrap things up nicely. We've talked about that quite a bit and I've got a slide on endings, but what I was just telling you about excessive background and how that plays into this trope of doing X to get Y to get Z, there's also just unnecessary background.

What I mean by unnecessary background is stuff that seems really interesting to you that has zero to do with the story. It's not even like it is an underpinning, it is a historical fact, it is something that supports a point that you're saying, but it's a level of detail that we don't

know we need to go into. It's background information that simply isn't relevant to the conclusion. It's not that it's not relevant to those conflicts or those scenes, but it's not relevant to the conclusion. That's how you know what to cut.

The thing about background is that, another very lazy trope, is to front-load background. And I see this in a lot of pitches, even more so than stories. These are often the pitches that die on the vine, where in your pitch, you just have so much information about what the story's about that the editor just loses the thread of what the story's about because you've told her so much that she's not sure what in particular you're trying to pitch her anymore.

This is front-loading. This is where before you get the audience interested, before they have bought into that inciting incident, to any of the conflict, while you're still in that stage of the status quo, before things have gotten interesting, you just give them so much information.

This is a fate that befalls a lot of novelists as well. If you look it up, you can find this front-loading of background information online quite a bit, but that's the way that it plays out with your travel stories: you're typically trying to put too much background, particularly history, in a sort of explanation-like setting in the front. And this goes into that age-old adage of "Show, don't tell."

Rather than telling people all these things and why they should care, you need to paint a picture and give them some details that create a scene that shows them.

We're going to get into structure in a second, but one other common faux pas here that kind of ebbs and flows: how much I see people using dialogue and action in their stories, but no characters. I talked about this a lot in our series on interviews a couple months back when we had a whole month on interviews, but characters are very, very important. In fact, I was saying that I've read a lot of the long-form travel books now, and I was just looking at one on the plane the other day because I was coming to the UK and my husband has recently started reading a lot of Bill Bryson, who's quite famous, but there's very little interacting with the people.

The thing is that with travel features it's so important to use characters because they show the place. They show how the people in that place are different than us.

Dream of Travel Writing

Story Structure to Take Your Travel Feature Articles to the Next Level

We were talking about lazy tropes, but I wanted to get into how this works in a story format for travel articles. I just want, because we had the little pause, go back and revisit what I mean about the time shift.

I talked about how this is kind of the basic format for how the Five C's relate in a travel article. The majority of our time is dedicated to this middle bit, number 2. But there is a time shift involved. What happens is chronology, this was something that was discussed on the very first slide when one of the people that I had read online in their tips about travel articles said, "Structure it thematically or chronologically."

I don't know how you could structure it thematically and it still be interesting, but quite honestly, chronologically typically doesn't work. So what happens when we take those 5 C's that we looked at and spread that out over your average travel article? It frequently takes the shape of this. We're going to talk about this specifically in the format of a couple different approaches, but this is a much more common chronological approach to how that overall story structure, that arc that we talked about, plays out in the real life of a published travel article.

It often begins in the middle. This is called, technically, *en media res*. It's Latin and it means, more or less, "beginning in the middle." This concept of beginning in the middle is something that if you aren't accustomed to writing travel features you probably often see employed. You might see people start a scene and think, "Wow, that's great. I need to start my story with some dialogue, with myself out in the field, with some action."

But here's the trick: to effectively and quickly without quibbling or wondering about what part of your story to begin with, the most salient piece of action that you can start with is the last bit. It's the obstacle that comes before the climax. It's the last challenge before your quest resolves.

You start there, but you stop before the climax. You stop before the resolution. Then the camera goes back. You go back through history on the little film screen of your travel feature to where it all began and you explain who you are, why this matters, and specifically why you embarked on this quest in the first place. That is the inciting incident. But the interesting thing here is that these two are actually a little more squished together so it's almost like you've got a scene, which is this last obstacle, then you've got a scene where you very quickly, like the voice-over in the movie, explain what is going on as well as why you embarked on this quest.

Story Structure to Take Your Travel Feature Articles to the Next Level

That being done, the quest resumes. So you go from the inciting incident into the obstacles, into the midpoint, to get back to where your story on paper began, but not where the story really began if that makes sense. You start not in the middle, but close to the end. Then you go back and retell the story and what happens is by the time you get back to where you are, like I mentioned about the hunger games, it should actually be very, very far late on the page of where your story's actually happening.

When we looked at those arcs earlier, this climax, consequences, conclusion bit should be a very small piece here. Because most of our story most of the time on the page is dedicated to showing, not telling. So that bit on the end where we were actually telling, not showing, should be quite short.

In the typical feature, the climax, consequences and conclusion should just take up one paragraph altogether, or maybe if you have a generous 2000-4000 words, those can take a couple paragraphs. But usually that bit should all get smooshed together.

A couple particular structural approaches you can use on top of this chronological approach. One I've talked about before and said we would again today is the Don George Feature Formula. I call that here the Fast Track to Transformation. The reason I call it that is that it really strictly sticks only to that concept of transformation. What for you was the change and exactly how did you get there? When you're writing with this approach it causes the story to come out on the page very quickly because you can write it in this non-chronological way just to get the scenes out and then move them around.

First you write down that transformation. When exactly did it happen? What did you realize? What was the take-home? Then you go back and you write the scenes that brought you there. And nothing else. You don't need anything else; just the exact—he likes to call it the stepping stones across the pond in a Japanese garden—only those rocks that you stepped on, none of the other bits need to be in there. Then you put it into the order, the chronology that works best for you now that you've gotten all those scenes on the page.

Another one is the Hero's Journey. It is a definitely more complicated way to get from current state to end result, but if you feel like you are nervous about structure and about figuring out what scenes, so to say, what actions need to happen, what information needs to be transferred, the Hero's Journey can be a very useful thing to check out.

Story Structure to Take Your Travel Feature Articles to the Next Level

The full version, which was written by psychologist who studied ancient heroes and their stories, is a 17-step process and I have a slide on that but you can find it online if you look up Hero's Journey. But yours as a travel writer shouldn't be that long because if you include every single step in this Hero's Journey in the typical 1500-word feature, it's going to be too much. You're not going to be able to devote enough attention to each step.

But the thing is that it is really a no-fail in terms of story structure. If you are using the Hero's Journey, and you actually stick to and make sure that you have checked off all of those boxes, you will certainly have a story. You'll have a story with an arc most definitely. So here's the full version. It looks super small on the screen and I'm just going to call out a couple of the things on here.

It begins with the call to adventure, which is this inciting incident that we talked about, and then it has a refusal to the call to adventure. This is something we typically don't have time for in our feature-length stories rather than a novel-length story. Then in the Hero's Journey there's all these supernatural elements. There's a supernatural aide, then the crossing of the first threshold. This is essentially a longer bit; there are several things in here that are the inciting incident.

Then it goes through a series of different trials. And here's where I was saying if you're really not sure about what to include, the hero structure does all the work for you. It tells you exactly what type of trials you need to have and what type of people they need to be. Which characters you need to introduce and what purposes they serve. It tells you which obstacles you need to have. If there are obstacles where you are having a self-moment of realization or whether the struggle, the issue has come from outside of yourself.

The shorter version, which I really like, I found online. It's from a website called Storyboard. I looked at a couple different versions where they had shortened it down, but I really like this one. I feel like it's applicable to a feature-length format.

It really shows that only this bit here, which is even probably longer than it is, is that climax, consequences, conclusion bit. Likewise, the current state is only one piece of this twelve-part pie. All of the rest of this are the adventure, the obstacles. The ones here have the same call to adventure, refusal, the mentor-helper.

I talked about characters and the need to introduce them and this is a really great one for any quest piece: the Yoda on your shoulder who is telling you the answers or the little bits of

information that you need to take that next step in your journey. When you follow this Hero's Journey structure, it shows you even when that mentor comes in. It also shows you when people who are you're "allies" or "enemies" come in.

There's a story that won a Thomas Loll award a few years ago, which is about buying a suit in Naples. So any type of quest where it's a travel story and you need to acquire something, it can be very easy to bring these mentors or allies or enemies in.

The mentor is the person who says, "You need to go to this shop and talk to that guy." The ally might be "that guy" who really wants to help but is going away on vacation for two weeks because it's August and that's what they do in Italy. So he says, "Go check out this other guy." But then this other guy totally tries to swindle you, so he's the enemy. When you follow this Hero's Journey, it tells you whom you need to include.

Here's the thing. Does life mirror art? Does art mirror life? Not usually, so you might have to dig around a bit in your own story to figure out whom that mentor or ally really is. And it might not be a person. It might be a website that you found that gave you this bit of information. It might be some other input that acted as that mentor that moved you forward. You'll often need to dig around to figure out what were the stepping-stones in that pond that took you from the beginning to your transformation.

Endings. I pulled a couple lines here from two works of fiction, which I guess we could say have a travel element, but are mainly works of fiction, that are known for their incredible lines. I pulled them because it's really important to remember this one thing about the last line. The best last book lines, the endings of the best stories, sound terribly trite without the stories that have brought you there.

Anna Karenina is known for the oft-misquoted first line about happy families. Feeling like you need to have a happy family, being different in it's own way or the reverse. People often argue about this so I'm not going to try to quote it, but here's how it ends: "My life now, my whole life, regardless of all that may happen to me, every minute of it, is not only not meaningless as it was before, but has the unquestionable meaning of the good which it is my power to put into it."

This is the kind of explanation that if you just say it without knowing what her journey was to get there, carries no weight whatsoever.

Dream of Travel Writing

Story Structure to Take Your Travel Feature Articles to the Next Level

A Tale of Two Cities. This starts with, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…” In the end, this is also pretty famous line, the ending line: “It is a far, far, better thing that I do than I have ever done; It is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.”

Now, it sounds theatrical, and that’s the thing: these last lines tend to sound just theatrical unless you know all of the things that it took to get there. I said earlier that you need to know where your story is going before you start picking out those obstacles and then that climax.

And here’s the thing: don’t be unhappy with yourself if that place that your story’s going, that conclusion, sounds really trite when you just say it. That’s how it is. The ending will sound trite until you put the story leading up to it in place. So don’t feel bad if when you begin it seems like the conclusion isn’t a big deal. If it was a transformation, a conclusion for you, and you show the reader, you take them along with you on those steps; it won’t sound trite at the end. They will be sitting there nodding their heads along with you.

Just a quick thing because I know a lot of things that we write these days, especially online, are actually a round-up feature rather than a narrative feature: you can still do this stuff for the round-up feature. You can still give it some arc. It sounds totally preposterous, even like a waste of time to do that, but if you’re in the zone with your writing where you are writing this kind of thing where these 1500 words are composed of a round-up of some kind, this is how you can create clips for yourself that you can use to springboard into better things. By adding this element of structure even into your round-up features.

How do we do this? First of all, we need that conclusion, also a point or a thesis, but we need that destination where our story’s meant to end. Then we chose the items that go into that round-up to make sure that they support that conclusion. And in the same way as that the five-paragraph essay, each of those things that we’re choosing supports that conclusion.

How do you order those steps in your journey? How do you order those elements in your round-ups? You order them in the same way that you would these narrative features. Now I know that sounds a bit weird, but typically what happens with a round up is that you have some things that are stronger, some things that are a bit weak. Maybe some things that show a mix of the current state versus where you want to go.

You might, for instance, have a round up that is around the concept that a certain city is transforming. Maybe it’s becoming hip or maybe it’s got a lot of craft things that are going on

and you're showing how it's becoming a "Made in Michigan: story of Detroit," even though that's a couple years old.

As you're telling this "Made in Michigan: story of Detroit," the things that you choose, some of them will be in a state of transition, showing this transition moment. Some of them will be already there and some of them might be local producers who've actually been there since before this state of transition. This is really common if you really dig into it, the things that you are including in your round up, that they're all at different points in this transition, in this transformation that you're trying to show as your thesis or your point or your conclusion.

Then you take those items that you're including and just like we talked about before in terms of the status quo, the inciting incident, the complications along the way and the conclusion, you order them thusly. So that each point in your round-up, even if the person reading it on an airplane, because it's take-off and they can't use their laptop and they're looking for something to do, as they follow through the text of your round-up, they're seeing this conclusion of Detroit really being a revolution of things being made in America. They're seeing that being built in each point of your round up. That's how you can do that, even with a feature composed of lots of tinier articles.

Thank you guys so much for joining today for this topic that I really love. Have a really great weekend! I look forward to seeing some of you on Saturday! Cheers!