

Personal Narratives: Changing Attitudes and Actions One Story at a Time

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Author Biography

Rebecca E. Burnett, PhD, is Professor Emerita in Georgia Institute of Technology's School of Literature, Media, and Communication, where she held the Class of '58 Professorship of Writing and Communication and served as Director of the Writing and Communication Program. She taught visual rhetoric and technical narrative. Her research continues, focusing on assessment, collaboration, digital pedagogy, multimodality, leadership, risk communication, and technical discourse. The University System of Georgia Board of Regents has recognized her with the Felton Jenkins, Jr. Hall of Fame Faculty Award for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

At Georgia Tech, students are surrounded by logic, by verifiable evidence, by carefully designed lines of argument, by tightly argued cases. However, in the world outside the academy, many audiences are likely to be influenced by emotion rather than logic. In fact, some audiences dismiss—even distrust—science as the basis for beliefs and decisions. *LMC 3408 Rhetoric of Technical Narrative* is a semester-long course about using narrative to convey technical and scientific information. Throughout the course, students learn to use verbal and visual narratives to translate and transform information from technology, science, and social science for general, non-expert audiences.

Both academic literature and mass market literature include considerable discussion about the role of narrative and the value of stories in the community and the workplace: articles to counter bullying, to reduce sexism and racism, to strengthen team function, to improve patient-caregiver relationships, to reduce workplace injuries. Further, journalists often use narrative strategies to frame news events: microplastics, food safety, manufacturing glitches, inspection violations, mud slides, water pollution, identity theft. In short, narrative is a powerful tool for educating non-expert audiences about technology, science, and social science.

On the first day of *LMC 3808, The Rhetoric of Technical Narrative*, students learn that in the public arena, logical argument often loses to emotional argument (see sidebar). Narratives are a powerful and effective way to present information, to embed facts so that audiences become intrigued with ideas they might otherwise resist or even reject. Narratives engage audiences—educating them about ideas, contextualizing information, and moving them to new ways of thinking. Thus, for our students, learning to tell effective stories is important because many audiences are more likely to be influenced by emotion than by logic.

Types of Argument

Logical argument—What is called “rational argument” uses facts and evidence-based reasons to influence or persuade an audience.

Emotional argument— What is called “irrational argument” uses stories and emotions to influence or persuade an audience.

Personal narrative

While learning to tell stories about sensitive, technical, and difficult subjects in the workplace and community is challenging, it's an important ability. Throughout the course, students learn to translate and transform information from technology, science, and social science for general, non-expert audiences. For the final project in this course, students create and record a personal narrative. The purpose of this assignment is synthesis—to incorporate storytelling, argument, collaboration, writing, orality, technology,

and self-, peer-, and audience assessment. In the end, if students can effectively tell a slice of their own story, they are very likely to be able to tell others' stories.

Preparation

Students prepare for creating and recording their personal narratives in a number of ways that encourage them to develop confidence that they have something of merit to say. The preparatory processes are generalizable to future academic, community, and workplace activities.

- *Recognize that effective stories are often multilayered.* Listening to the TED Talk of Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie helps students learn to value the complexity of their own lives, to understand that hearing a single message about another person risks misunderstanding.
- *Develop strategies of storytelling.* Participating in a workshop with guest speakers from Georgia Tech's Transformative Narratives Initiative helps students learn to craft a personal story that moves an audience. Alternatively, go to <https://sdie.gatech.edu/transformative-narratives> to read about the Transformative Narratives Initiative and listen to examples of moving narratives.
- *Learn the basics of timing, recording, and editing.* Participating in a podcast workshop with one of our Georgia Tech librarians introduces students to useful podcast processes and tools (e.g., in thank you notes to the guest speaker, students often mention benefits of the Audacity editing demo).
- *Think about approaches.* Writing weekly blog posts analyzing ways narratives convey critical concepts reinforces various approaches adaptable to their own storytelling.
- *Apply course concepts.* Reading and following the assignment sheet reminds students to take intellectual risks and consider ways to apply some of the core course concepts (see sidebar).
- *Write a memo proposal.* Defining and scheduling (with a Gantt chart) the creation of a personal narrative—particularly one that involves a physical, intellectual, emotional, financial, or social risk—applies all the concepts and strategies of the course.

Creation and Presentation

Students create and refine a working outline (a sequence of elaborated talking points with production notes rather than a word-for-word script). The personal narratives are typically between 10-12 minutes. Students practice—and practice more—before recording and editing their personal narrative using strong storyteller strategies. Some students add music and/or sound effects; others have silence as the background. In the process of creation, students collect feedback on their story drafts and revise based on their interpretation of that feedback. Students present their final personal narrative orally in class and also record their personal narrative, which is made available to their classmates and the instructor.

Influential Concepts and Strategies

Prior knowledge—previous beliefs, education, and experiences that necessarily influence the ways you perceive and interpret new information

Re-mixes—creating new or different versions of a recording (usually a video or song) by deleting from, changing, and/or adding to the original

Translation—Adapting information for a new audience (e.g., translating information in a medical journal to a mass market newspaper; translating an aerospace engineering drawing for nonexperts watching CNN)

Transformation—Changing and reshaping ideas or information—that is, changing *genre* (print to web), *scale* (thumbnail to poster), *medium* (live demo to video), *mode* (from written to oral), *scope* (manual to tip sheet), color palette (4-color to B&W), or *pace* (self-paced to auto-paced PPT)

Transference—Applying/generalizing communication strategies from one context or situation to another (e.g., transferring appropriate use of metaphors from academic to workplace situations)

Reflection

Throughout the course, students practice various kinds of reflection as a critical part of learning. Following the presentation and posting of their personal narrative, students create three reflective documents.

- *Create an artist statement.* Earlier in the course, students learn that designers, developers, and artists often create a statement to accompany an artifact—a statement that presents information such as the philosophy of the designer, the intention of the artifact, and approach used in the artifact’s development. Students report that this artist statement helps them articulate their aesthetic intentions and explain their narrative’s purpose, process, and philosophy.
- *Prepare a user-test report.* At various stages in the development of their personal narrative, students try it with test audiences (anywhere from two or three to a half-dozen listeners who provided feedback about the draft/in-process versions), record the reactions and suggestions, and revise to improve the narrative. The user test report describes the benefit of the testing, summarizes the test results, interprets and reacts to the results, and describes changes in the narrative as a result of testing. Students report that this activity gives them a new way to think about and practice user testing, which is a critical professional strategy for many of them.
- *Compose a self-assessment.* Student are given a list of 20 topics that serve as fodder for reflection; they’re asked to select two or three for discussion. They’re also asked to discuss (a) the *intellectual merit* of their narrative—that is, how their personal narrative might advance knowledge, improve understanding, and/or bring about changes in beliefs and/or actions and (b) the *broader impact* of their narrative—that is, how their personal narrative might benefit society and/or serve people who have been in some way underrepresented or misrepresented. Students report that this self-assessment challenges them to think about their narrative project more broadly and consider its potential long-term value to others.

Students often include their personal narrative (and some of their ancillary documents) in their professional portfolio—as a model of the high-quality work they can produce.

Extension

This personal narrative assignment can be adapted to other purposes and classes. Consider these possibilities: adapt the *processes* of the assignment in part or in their entirety (preparation, creation, presentation, and reflection); adapt the *components* of the assignment in part or in their entirety (storytelling, argument, collaboration, writing, orality, technology, and self-, peer, and audience assessment); adapt the *purpose* of the assignment by using narratives other than personal stories to convey information to non-expert audiences; adapt the *concepts* (re-mix, translate, transform, transfer) that undergird the assignment to other situations.