Workshopping Essay Structure: A Hollywood-Inspired Classroom and Online Model

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Research shows that students write better academic essays if the instructor facilitates a process of preparation that allows for purposeful peer discussion. Drawing on screenwriting pedagogy, this article proposes a workshop model that lets students express their essay's structural elements as single sentences, which allows for effective peer and large-group feedback throughout the research, draft, and revision process. Sharing such elements on a digital workspace creates a sense of audience that motivates better work. Students can also apply insights from this model to other writing formats and oral presentations, which widens the utility of undergraduate writing classes. Particularly for inexperienced instructors, such as teaching assistants, this approach can offer useful step-by-step guidance for turning crowded classrooms or online sessions into workshops with small-group dynamics more commonly found in graduate writing seminars.

Teaching assistants with varying degrees of experience and expertise are often who guide undergraduates in courses with an emphasis on academic writing. Universities can offer sparse training, and many TAs start out with little more than the age-old five-paragraph theme (FPT) to inform their instruction. For undergraduate papers that extend beyond a few pages, the FPT offers minimal guidance for how to plan and execute a convincing argument that develops throughout the paper. Precisely how one structures an academic essay can remain unclear, pedagogical approaches and vernacular vary, and students can be left with trying to interpret how something called the "so what?" applies to the paper they have to submit by a rapidly approaching deadline.

Research shows that this process can benefit if the instructor can facilitate high levels of peer interaction through a discussion-dependent approach (Applebee & Langer, 2013; Juzwik et al., 2013; Krause, 2001). Students who engage in purposeful dialogue with peers are likely to write higher quality papers with more complex arguments (Graham & Perin, 2007). To achieve peer interaction that is purposeful, simply allowing students time to talk about their essays is not enough. Small and large-group discussion should be part of a structured process, one that frontloads essay preparation well ahead of deadlines, and that continues throughout the writing phase (Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, & McCann, 2011). The instructor should teach methodology that offers students cohesive and practical scaffolding for the entire process of inquiry, discussion, writing, and revision (McCann, 2014).

The much-disputed FPT has for generations been the most common methodology at the high school level. Some find FPT to be too simple, even for short papers (Foley, 1989; Miller, 2010; Wesley, 2000). Others view it as a perfectly suitable stepping stone (Smith, 2006). I have encountered no one who finds the FPT to be sufficient beyond high school, yet no similarly hegemonic model has arisen on college campuses, likely due to the added complexity of a more mature essay. When an argument must develop past five paragraphs, an approach such as this becomes too bare boned:

> The FPT requires (1) an introductory paragraph moving from a generality to an explicit thesis statement and announcement of three points in support of that thesis, (2) three middle paragraphs, each of which begins with a topic sentence restating one of the major ideas supporting the thesis and then develops the topic sentence (with a minimum of three sentences in most models), and (3) a concluding paragraph restating the thesis and points. (Nunnally, 1991, p. 67)

Comparing Essays to Film

Academia's issue with not having a general model for essay structure, or a detailed, agreed-upon vernacular, is similar to how Hollywood used to lack an explicit screenplay structure. Experienced academics internalize how an argument unfolds, but they can still struggle with passing on their insights. Similarly, experienced screenwriters knew how to keep audiences captivated for two hours, but they did not necessarily have the terminology, or models, to effectively teach the structural mechanics that they themselves knew how to execute. This didactic shortcoming became untenable for an industry that is intensely collaborative, with hundreds, or even thousands, of people working together on the same project, all of whom need to be on the same page. With sometimes hundreds of millions of dollars on the line, strong incentives existed for the development of screenplay pedagogy that promoted shared practices and vocabularies.

Since the 1910s, cinematic storytelling had evolved toward what today can be referred to as Hollywood structure. How one crafts such a structure, or which elements are optimal to include, did not become agreed

upon or formulated cohesively until after *Star Wars* (1977). George Lucas's masterful remediation of Joseph Campbell's monomyth from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) convinced Hollywood executive Christopher Vogler, and later the industry, that structural adherence was key to making commercially successful film (Ranieri, 2017). By the 1990s, a detailed roadmap for script development had become commonly available and embraced. Teachers of the craft emphasize different aspects of this structure, and some terms vary, but in the twenty-first century there has been little disagreement over how a typical film is put together, and practitioners broadly agree on terms for narrative elements (Bordwell, 2006; Truby, 2007; Vogler, 1999).

No Hollywood-sized stakes have pushed academic writing toward similarly useful models. On the contrary, teaching students how to write has become less of a priority. After American academia's golden age of composition (1870–1910), the field was demoted to the humbler position where it remains (Brereton, 1995). By contrast, cinema's pedagogical breakthrough made screenplay development more effective—or at least more streamlined—not only in Hollywood, but around the world where this model has become increasingly influential.

For screenwriting students at undergraduate and graduate levels, too, the new approach facilitates more effective workshopping of structural elements before the script writing itself commences. Such elements include, among others, a protagonist's problem and weakness, an inciting incident, a first act break with a goal, a climax choice, and a resolution. By expressing the protagonist's weakness in one precise sentence, the student can discuss its suitability with the instructor and other students more effectively. It can quickly become clear whether the climax choice—also expressed in one sentence—has the right connection to the weakness that the protagonist must overcome. At this early stage of development, changes can be frequent and uncostly. If a poor connection is discovered only after a hundred-page screenplay is drafted, a complete rewrite is likely required, which can drain motivation. Particularly in undergraduate sections of twenty students or more, being able to discuss structural elements early and effectively is key to progress and student satisfaction.

Similarly, in an academic writing course, if students can get early feedback on their thesis statements being too obvious, their approach can be adjusted before excessive efforts are wasted, which helps keep motivation up. Adding additional elements to the familiar thesis statement helps focus students also on those other aspects of their text that allow for a complex argument to develop. Combined, these elements compose what I, mostly for the purpose of a catchy title, refer to as a Hollywood-inspired essay

model. To argue for the model's utility, this article will (1) outline how Hollywood structure helps facilitate effective pedagogy for classrooms both physical and online, (2) present an essay structure that builds on similar pedagogy, (3) suggest how this essay model can be taught using a Google Doc as a shared digital workspace, and (4) offer an example of how these insights can be applied to other formats.

Juxtaposing fictional film and academic essays as two expressions of long-form storytelling can be seen as controversial because "a sort of cold war has ensued in English studies, slowing the exchange of ideas between creative writing and composition, despite encouragement for such exchanges" (Winkler, 2018). Winkler shows that there exists a long tradition in which composition borrows tools and techniques from writers of fiction and non-fiction. Although screenplays and essays are very different, showing what commonalities divergent types of writing share helps students adapt to unfamiliar formats (Roderick, 2019). Research shows that those who identify similarities write better because they trust that habits that worked for them in the past can be applied to novel challenges (Beaufort, 2007). Such practices of writing transfer have been shown to promote sophisticated writing across diverse formats (Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014).

With the long-standing crisis of composition (or at least perceived crisis), promoting practices with wider application than academic essay writing makes sense for a variety of reasons (Dobrin, 2011; Horner, 2015; Smit, 2004). Critics have argued that composition courses do not sufficiently prepare students for the writing requirements that they are likely to encounter after graduation. This article attempts to offer methodology that speaks to both sides of this debate. Its approach extends not only "across the disciplines," but to other types of long-form fiction and non-fiction, such as oral presentations, narrative memos, dissertations, novels, long-form journalism, et cetera.

The core commonality of such formats is that one-way communication over an extended period of time requires an engaging beginning and a satisfying end, with deliberate adherence to a cohesive agent throughout. If students can master those elements in an essay, the insights they acquire apply more widely, too. For most undergraduates, writing-course papers are among the last academic essays they will write. If they can learn an effective structural approach, the writing course can impart an understanding of, and a methodology for, storytelling that can be useful for students throughout their lives. Such an approach can help students clearly and convincingly communicate to others whichever insights they arrive at, whether for professional, civilian, or leisurely purposes.

Figure 1
The Hollywood structure prescribes how to unfold an emotionally impactful argument for overcoming character weakness.

Act One		Act Two			Act Three	
10	25 min. or %		50		75	100

Set Up — Decision — *Inciting Incident* — New World — Little Battle — *First Act Break* — Intensification — Big Gloom — *Mid Point* — Big Battle — End — *Second Act Break*
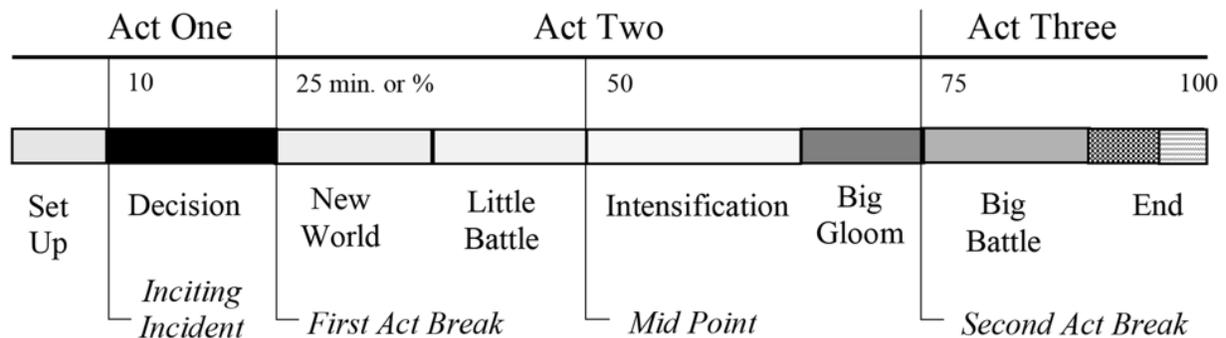
Hollywood Structure

Novice filmmakers who only have the bare bones of an Aristotelian three-act structure to guide their screenwriting face a similar challenge like that of essay writers who only know the five-paragraph theme. Aristotle can be instructive for a brief narrative, but when you have over ninety minutes to fill, a beginning, an end, and two act breaks offer insufficient guidance. To shape a compelling journey for the protagonist, a more detailed breakup of the first act and additional turning points later in the story can be of tremendous help. This is what the Hollywood structure offers. Figure 1 lays out my interpretation of this model, but all elements and their formulations rely on the work of Christopher Vogler (1999), David Bordwell (2006), John Truby (2007), and many more.

Most modern films are about a protagonist who has a character weakness and a problem that is related to this weakness. In an emotionally satisfying climax, the problem is solved by overcoming the weakness, which turns the story into a journey of self-realization. In tragedies, the protagonist succumbs to the weakness. The Hollywood structure is a recipe for how this journey is made compelling through applying structural elements in a certain order.

The purpose of the Set Up sequence (see Figure 1; capitalized terms refer to model-specific elements) is to show how the protagonist struggles with her character-related problem. When the Inciting Incident occurs around the 10-minute mark, audiences therefore understand how this "call to action" offers an opportunity for growth. At the First Act Break, the protagonist commits to a goal that she pursues until the climax choice after the Big Battle. At this crux, what she has learned from the story's previous sequences lets her act in a way that would have been inconceivable at the beginning of the film. The story thus becomes an argument for how a person can overcome a certain weakness so that the person can become whole, which allows for a more authentic life.

Simply plotting these structural elements into a screenplay is no guarantee for a great film. Neither films nor essays can be reduced to structure; formulaic boredom is always the result when well-structured content has little to convey. Like essays have ideas, argument, prose, et cetera, films have character, aesthetics, thematic argument, and so forth. Focusing on structure is never an alternative to any of those other elements, but rather a foundation that allows those elements to be put to better use. Structure alone did not make *Citizen Kane* (1941), but without the innovative film's structural mastery, its other elements would have mattered less. The same is true for essays. Exquisite prose, penetrating analysis, and persuasive rhetoric all lose potency if not expressed within a suitable frame. Good structure helps readers understand the argument, read more efficiently, and remember more of what they have read (Meyer, 2003).

When students have been taught Hollywood structure, they can assess whether the story they want to tell is a good fit. Not all stories are suitable as feature films, similar to how not all arguments can be turned into great essays. Yet most starting points can be developed into something more conducive, a process for which—I argue—a structural approach is likely the most effective, at least in the context of crowded classrooms. Students can share their one-sentence expressions for character weakness, problem, act breaks, climax choice, and resolution. Not all elements at the same time, but as the course progresses. Because all students have learned what the structure requires in order to promote effective storytelling, everyone knows what to look for and how to offer useful criticism and advice.

Sharing these sentences on a Google Doc, which can be projected to the classroom's screen or viewed

Figure 2
The model identifies structural essay elements that students should focus on during development. Sharing vocabulary and an understanding of structure helps facilitate effective peer interaction and large-group workshopping.
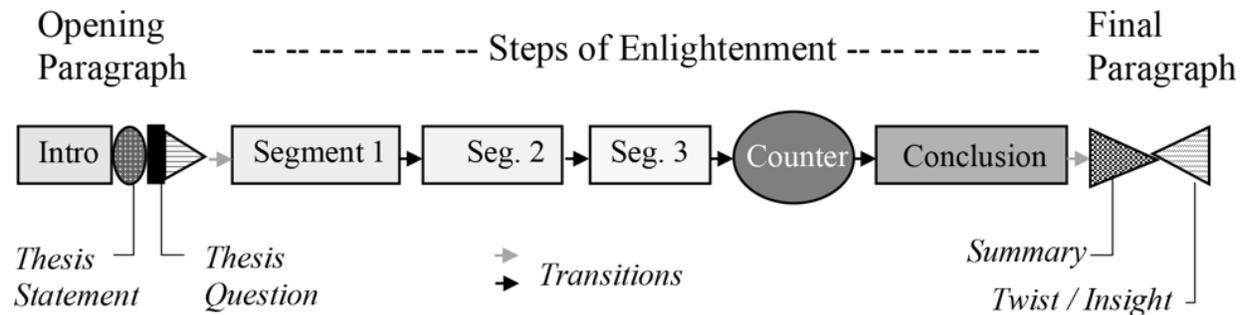
communally in online classes, lets the instructor workshop examples in front of everyone. Students get to experience how poor starting points can be developed into something more useful, while the instructor also establishes considerate practices through compassionate vernacular. Being a role model and setting the right tone is paramount. Sharing one's creative work can make students feel vulnerable, so for this model to work it is crucial that the instructor sets low bars of expectation and makes students understand that there is generous room to experiment. For less talkative students, too, such a communal, dialogic approach has proven beneficial (Schultz, 2009).

From Film to Essay

An essay of more than a few pages faces many of the same challenges as a cinematic narrative that lasts more than ten-twenty minutes. Ask any comedian who has tried to write a film without first learning structure; just stringing funny scenes together—no matter how great they are—becomes repetitive. Similarly, an FPT-inspired argument that keeps making the same claim with new evidence remains flat and unappealing. Each segment of the essay—like each sequence of a film—should build on what preceded it, then push toward what is to come. To cultivate this strong argumentative through-line, it is imperative to know what ties everything together.

Within Hollywood structure, this cohesive agent is the protagonist's character weakness. Film narrative should be structured so that it constantly challenges this weakness, imparting lessons that the protagonist will bring together in the climax. If the film has succeeded in making the audience care about the flawed protagonist, they will invest emotionally in her character arc and feel that sequences are connected through how they facilitate her growth. The stronger this though-line is, the more

complexity and multitude the story can contain. A poorly defined hero with an unclear goal—no matter how good singular scenes may be—is likely to lose audiences, and the film will fail to get its thematic argument across.

Similarly, an essay's Segments should develop insights that are necessary for the reader to understand the essay's Conclusion (see Figure 2; here, too, capitalized terms refer to model-specific elements). The cohesive agent for the essay's argumentative journey is what this model terms Thesis Question. This element relates to what many instructors refer to as the "so what?" Both terms—Thesis Question and "so what?"—attempt to convey a more abstract concept, for which scholars have offered a multitude of terms and interpretations. This article strives for specificity and clarity by dividing the Thesis Question into its two elements: Thesis Method and Thesis Purpose (for a more detailed visual model, see the pedagogical one-page in the article's appendix). What this model most importantly adds to the FPT's Thesis Statement are the elements Thesis Question and Steps of Enlightenment. Before we examine those, we must touch on the elements that precede them.

Elements of the Opening Paragraph

For an undergraduate essay of around five pages, or 1500 words, the Opening Paragraph is typically less than a page, as is the Final Paragraph. The purpose of the Intro is to convey the information that is necessary so that when the Thesis Statement is presented, the reader understands the relevance of its claim. Experienced writers could turn a weak Statement into a strong essay, but for the novice a poor thesis tends to doom the exploration. Crucial to the Statement's potential is formulating something so specific and/or bold that a reasonable person could disagree (Lunsford & Ruszkiewicz, 2015). If the Statement makes everyone

nod in agreement, the student has already conveyed the case, and no essay is needed. The student would likely run out of purpose early, then descend into meandering, tangential support that no one cares about. A Statement should engender resistance, of some form, so that an investigation is needed to bring the reader along.

If the student formulates nothing but a Thesis Statement, all that is called for is finding evidence for its support. The FPT would suffice as guidance, but the essay's argument would have little to build toward. This is where the Thesis Question comes in. This element, when expressed as "So what?," does encourage deeper thinking. But what I term Thesis Question becomes clearer and more useful when broken up into its two components. The Question's Method is what the author will do in respect to the Statement. The Method is straight-forward to find, and students quickly master this element. Simply engage the core specificity of the Statement.

For instance, if the prompt asks students to "explore the depiction of disability in Petter Næss's film *Elling* (2001)," a student's initial Statement could be that "the film shows that in these cases of mild intellectual disability, it is better to integrate people in communities instead of in institutions." This is a relevant claim, but most who have seen the film would immediately agree. To engender resistance, specificity could be achieved through a suggestion of causation. The student could add, "because living similarly to those without disabilities is key to happiness." We can now agree that in cases like with the film's intellectually disabled protagonist, apartments are preferable to institutions. But we can disagree on whether this is because people with disabilities should mimic the lives of those without disability, which gives the writer something specific to fight for. After this brief workshopping, the core specificity of the Statement—which the Method will engage—has become "living similarly is key to happiness."

The Method has two sides. One is the exploration of the presence of what the Statement regards itself with, which is "people with disabilities living similarly." The other side is the absence of this, which is "people with disabilities not living similarly." If the subject matter—in this case the film *Elling*—does not portray the absence, the Statement could be less suitable. The student should consider finding a new one in order to avoid a one-sided exploration. Fortunately, *Elling* shows both sides of the Statement's claim. The Method could therefore be expressed as "to explore in *Elling* which aspects of living similarly to people without disabilities most effectively promote happiness for the disabled." Wording could vary, but content-wise it is usually obvious how an undergraduate should go about exploring a Statement, based on the prompt's formulation, the subject matter at hand, and the Statement's core specificity.

That the article should concern itself with finding evidence to support this claim is also obvious. This is what the ensuing Segments will do. But, importantly, insights gleaned from this investigation will be put in service of a particular Purpose. The student will bring those insights together in the article's Conclusion to answer what the Purpose part of the Thesis Question posited as its goal. While the Method is dictated by the Statement's core specificity, the Purpose can be many things. A good Purpose directs the essay to where the student has the most significant insights to offer. For the *Elling* prompt, the Purpose could be "to suggest which parts of the Scandinavian disability model would be implementable in the U.S." Or, "to show how neighbors of the disabled can contribute to effective integration." With the Purpose, the essay establishes its potential. It is therefore an element that should be workshopped extensively, particularly at later stages of the course, once students have mastered the Thesis Statement.

In the essay text itself, the Thesis Question does not have to be expressed in a single sentence, but it could. For workshopping purposes, it should. Such a sentence can be patterned as "by [doing the following] (Method), this paper seeks to [answer the following] (Purpose)." Thesis Statements should be specific and not hold back information. By contrast, Purposes only pitch what will be revealed in the Conclusion. Once the Question is conveyed, the Opening Paragraph is concluded. The reader knows where the student stands, what the article will do, and what the argument seeks to achieve. Because the Purpose is ambitious, the student will have no choice but to craft a complex argument, which will build from Segment to Segment toward a convincing—or at least interesting—Conclusion. Throughout this exploration, the reader will know what is at stake and how to judge the student's efforts. The writer is ready for argumentative battle.

Steps of Enlightenment

In a short essay, a Segment is typically one paragraph, and there is room for two to four such Segments. The content of each should be expressible through a declarative sentence. Importantly, each Segment's claim should be different; this is how an argument builds. Workshopping Segments that are reduced to sentences reveals if a student is on course to simply add more evidence to the same claim, in an FPT-like manner. A difference in formulation could camouflage that a claim is more or less the same as the previous claim, which students themselves may be blind to, but which peers are quicker to pick up on.

The first Segment usually offers evidence to make the most straight-forward case for the validity of the Statement. From this starting point, the argument builds toward the question that will be answered in the

Conclusion. Because students have a Purpose, they know which insights to look for, which are those needed for the reader to understand the Conclusion. Sometimes, the argument itself must be postponed until Segment 2. If concepts are left undefined from the Opening Paragraph, Segment 1 is where such is taken care of. This first Segment is also where methodology or additional introduction can be unloaded. Whatever ducks there are, get them in a row, then head for the argument.

In essay instruction, a perennial challenge is to define what an argument is (Lunsford & Ruszkiewicz, 2015; McCann, 2014; Smagorinsky et al., 2011; Wingate, 2012). The concept can bewilder even seasoned scholars. In her bestselling *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks*, Wendy Laura Belcher writes, "I have found through teaching argument that it isn't that useful. The most useful way to learn to construct a journal article argument is to study examples" (2009, p. 83). I concur, but instructors should not point students only to examples from published scholars, as such work can be hard to relate to undergraduate efforts. Students should workshop each other's arguments, a process which tends to be more eye-opening when learning essay writing than staring yourself blind on your own structure-in-progress. We seem to have an easier time recognizing the shortcomings of a text we did not invest in ourselves, and lessons drawn from giving feedback to peers help us recognize our own weaknesses as well.

Using Steps of Enlightenment as a framework for such an analysis focuses students on how an argument consists of parts, or steps, which lead the reader to the enlightenment that the Conclusion is meant to provide. The steps, or Segments, are the legs that the Conclusion's case will stand on, making its complex insights comprehensible. It is a bad sign if, during workshop, a student can simply tell peers what the Conclusion is and everyone fully understands and agrees without being familiar with the Segments. Likely, the Conclusion is not sufficiently complex to warrant its surrounding essay; a mere paragraph would have sufficed.

These Steps form the essay's argumentative through-line. To diagnose this line's tightness, look at between-paragraph transitions. After the Opening Paragraph, and before the Final Paragraph, the transition can be weak. Between Segments, the counter-argument, and the Conclusion, transitions should be strong. What one paragraph ends with should relate to how the next paragraph begins, and instead of mere verbal transitions, content should be what connects.

Ending the Essay

As the essay reveals its argument to readers, they examine it for weakness. Before hitting them with the Conclusion, it can be strategic to quiet their critical minds. Belcher writes, "To persuade readers, they must first have doubts, or believe that others have doubts that your argument is right. So, to construct a sound argument, build in a consideration of opposing voices" (2009, p. 84). For workshopping purposes, ask students to express the most intelligent counter-position to their own argument as a single sentence. This should demonstrate that students are aware of which premises their argument rests on. But once they have made their opponents' case, they have to—in the essay—sweep the legs from under it. The reader should be convinced that, despite disagreement, the perspective of the paper in question is the most relevant one, or at least an interesting one. Ideally, the Counter should be so alluring that the reader wonders whether the author is about to fail. Those are exciting stakes. But the Counter cannot have the most convincing position. If it does, students should reconsider their thesis, or as a last resort, simplify the Counter. Great films can have tragic endings, but academic essays cannot.

Not all essays benefit from including a Counter, but students should be encouraged to develop one. Examining what we feel intuitive resistance against can be an eye-opening exercise, because most positions— even the foulest and most populist ones—tend to be logically constructed. When two positions are mutually exclusive, yet both are logical, what remains is to weigh relevance. Few lessons are more demanding and potentially valuable than getting across to students how our ever more intricate reality can be better understood from a position of weighing relevance than from one that pits good against bad, or right against wrong. Once students have formulated a counter-position and weighed its relevance, they must consider if including this element strengthens the essay or not. Counters can be omitted, and they can also be placed in other positions than right before the Conclusion.

When Segments have conveyed the necessary insights, and the Counter has appeased the critical reader, it is time to answer the Thesis Question in the Conclusion paragraph. As the course progresses, more time should be spent pushing students to think further. Have them present their tentative Conclusion, then ask, "So what?," or, "What are the consequences of that?" Students are often surprised by their ability to offer more significant insights on the spot, but they will eventually get stuck. Ask them to reexamine the subject matter, to research additional sources, or to simply lie awake at night, with the mobile out of reach, ruminating. This process can lead to Conclusions that are more significant, but that no longer answer the Thesis Question. A new thesis would then need to be formulated. This can often be done by turning the previous Conclusion sentence into a Thesis Statement, then coming up with a new Purpose sentence that points to the new Conclusion. And, yes, if the paper has already been written, most likely a complete rewrite is required. In an ideal world, we

workshop until we know our final Conclusion before we start writing. In our world, we revise.

After the essay's exploration is brought to a climax—answering all questions—no transition is needed into the Final Paragraph. From a research perspective, the student's work could be done, but long-form storytelling begs for "one more thing." First, sum up the argument to let readers know what the investigation achieved. Then, ideally, offer a Twist that brings the essay from the specifics of its exploration to a more general application of insights gleaned. This is difficult, and few students master it by the end of the course. The reader should not anticipate what the Twist is, but it must be prepared for. Segments developed insights that were necessary for the Conclusion to be understood, and this was done openly. Likewise, the information that is necessary for the Twist to feel relevant must have been shared, although more sneakily. The end should be somewhat unexpected.

Advice on which Twist to look for is elusive. This element often shows how the essay's insights could apply within a larger structure, or it can point to interesting new areas for research. Tell students to experiment, but not to despair if their Twist lacks brilliance. A poor thesis has consequences for the entire essay, but a poor Twist only leaves a slightly dull aftertaste. Alternatively, settle for a Final Insight to end on an up-note. Summarize, then offer one more insight that furthers the argument but without sending it in a grander direction. Many students instead taper off with well-meant advice or motivational exclamations. This may feel appropriate, but it is a poor substitute. With all long-form storytelling, end strong.

Workshop via a Google Doc

Few, or none, of the elements and insights here described should be unfamiliar to experienced scholars. Conveying a general understanding of this model to students, however, typically takes a few weeks. It is, after all, quite a bit more complex than the FPT. Mastering the model's main elements requires months, and not all students will be able to execute everything successfully. But understanding the model's elements, as well as letting students experience how the model helps them offer each other purposeful feedback, provides a foundation upon which students can continue to improve long after the course is completed. Likewise, the shared Google Doc helps instill habits of preparation that will be beneficial for all types of writing. In which order elements are workshopped on this shared digital workspace is informed by how the more challenging elements build on the students' mastery of more foundational elements. For the first essay's draft and revision, focusing on the Thesis Statement suffices.

The instructor pastes students' names in the Google Doc, requiring that students submit their sentences before each section. An early homework can be to submit one sentence for each of the following: (a) Intro, (b) Thesis Statement, and (c) Thesis Question with Method and Purpose.

At first, element (c) is likely to confuse, but workshopping will make it clearer. Once students experience how flat their essays remain without a Thesis Question, they tend to become enthusiastic about incorporating one. Later homework can switch (a) out with (d) Conclusion, it too expressed as a single sentence. Once the Thesis Question is mastered, the element (e) Steps of Enlightenment becomes the new challenge. When students experience how crucial it is to plan deliberate steps in order to craft an argument that builds throughout the paper, this element becomes embraced, too. Homework could be this:

> Try to use only 3–6 words per statement (more is allowed). After your name, share each essay paragraph's claim. Pattern example: (0) Thesis Statement, (1) Segment 1, (2) Segment 2, (3) Segment 3, (4) Counter, (5) Conclusion, and (6) Twist/Final Insight.

From the progression of these claims it should become clear whether the student has constructed an argument in which each element builds logically upon what preceded it. Students can work in pairs or small groups in the classroom or in online breakout rooms, critiquing each other's steps. To initiate or round off a session, the instructor can workshop a few submissions in front of the whole class. In-depth instructor analysis of a few is preferable to shallowly covering many. Those whose material is not commented on can benefit just as much, and knowing that everyone has access to read their sentences incentivizes better work.

Because this model distills elements into mere sentences, students can vary their efforts. Those who are eager can spend hours producing material, while busy or less ambitious students can jot down the day's submission in minutes. This flexibility is meant to engender a positive attitude toward having mandatory homework before every section, which is key to promoting a long period of preparation. Even with hasty submissions, essays are given time to percolate in the student's mind, which has a positive effect (Torrance, Thomas, & Robinson, 2000).

Early in the course, the instructor provides much of the in-class feedback. As students gain mastery, large-group student feedback and small-group peer interaction takes over as the instructor speaks less. Irrespective of which phase the feedback occurs in, the result is what Belcher refers to as a "community with a strong sense of audience," within which "the best writing

Figure 3

This article's "Hollywood structure" is a particular film structure, which can be further refined to include more detailed, genre-specific elements. Similarly, "essay structure" refers to papers within the humanities, although the model can be adjusted to fit other disciplines or refined to fit a particular field. Insights from these two models can also be used to structure other long-form story formats, whether the one in question is included in this illustration or not.

Action   Romantic Comedy   Horror   Literature   History   Philosophy   Art   Politics

Art Film   **Hollywood**   Classical Bollywood   Social Sciences   **Humanities**   Sciences

Oral Story   Film   Serialized TV   Novel   Speech   Scholarly Essay   Narrative Memo

Fictional Narrative   Argument

Long-Form Story
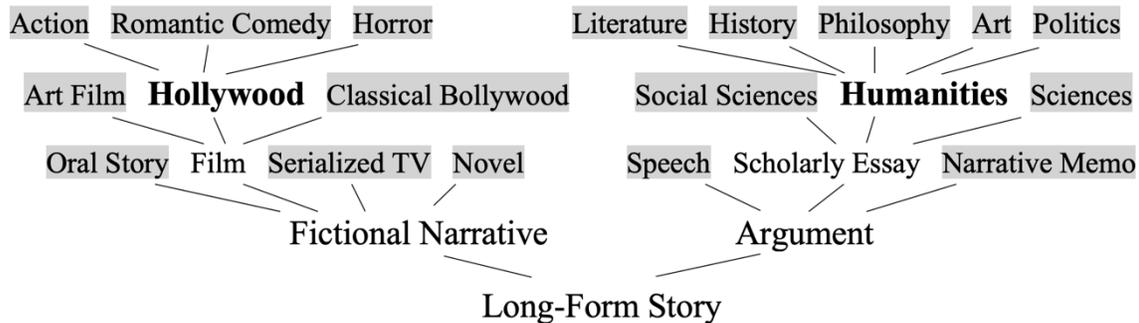
is created" (2009, p. 7). Such communities are more often found in graduate writing seminars. With fewer students and more hours, such seminars provide time to assess everyone's work more holistically. In twenty-plus-person, fifty-minute undergraduate sections, I argue that a structural model, such as the one outlined here, is likely to be the most efficient approach. Research shows that shared digital workspaces can help instructors compensate for larger class size, without adding to the instructor workload (Ferriman, 2013).

Lessons for Other Formats

How I have formulated the essay model's elements optimizes for wide applicability within the humanities. In other disciplines, the ordering of elements and which terms they are given should be adapted to the field in question. The underlying structure should remain the same, as all effective long-form storytelling unfolds in a similar manner. Note also how when essays become longer and include an abstract, figure 2 must be slightly revised. Figure 3 is how I conceptualize a hierarchy of structural formats for the context of this article. The advantage of using Hollywood structure as a pedagogical starting point is that everyone is familiar with the format, and more importantly that mainstream screenplay structure has become so defined that it offers the most detailed map for comparison.

After accounting for two structural models, one for commercial cinema and the other for undergraduate essays, we can identify quite a few parallels. Not all of the elements that follow below are equally analogous, but—as Roderick, Beaufort, and Yancey et al. argue— pushing students to look for commonalities promotes

confidence and adaptability when they face novel writing challenge. To compare, we saw that the essay needs an Intro for readers to understand the relevance of the Thesis Statement. Similarly, films need a Set Up for audiences to understand that the Inciting Incident offers the protagonist an opportunity for a better life. In the Decision sequence, the protagonist decides what to do, which evokes the essay's Method. The film's Act One ends—like the Opening Paragraph does—by establishing a goal that will be achieved near the end of the film/essay.

From a structural viewpoint, the New World is similar to Segment 1. We prepare for battle, but only in the Little Battle and Segment 2 do we give the impression of trying to achieve the goal. We fail to fully succeed, yet we do this in a way that pushes our quest onward. For regular-length films, as with undergraduate essays, three sequences/Segments can suffice between the goal-setting and the Big Gloom/Counter. We then journey into near defeat, only to escape for one last push toward solving our weakness/Question. In the film's End, harmony is restored, but a new seed of conflict is planted, not unlike how a good essay Twist points to new questions. Throughout the film, audiences should know how the protagonist progresses toward overcoming the weakness, just like readers should know how Segments illuminate what the Thesis Question promised to answer.

Hopefully, this comparison sheds light on how story formats share structural traits. We could apply a similar structure to, for instance, a business presentation. You may be in charge of finding novel ways to attract clients for a senior care franchise. To

convince your colleagues that a new 5G device is both helpful for seniors who fear falling, and for selling additional services, you want to present your case as effectively as you can. Instead of speaking whatever comes to mind, you prepare a presentation that you structure similarly to an essay, or film. Building on what you learned in college, you first present what your company's current situation is and why this is suboptimal. You let your colleagues know what you will present—which engages what is suboptimal—and hint at what your conclusion will be. You have now grabbed their attention and let them invest in your thesis. Go through your segments, one at a time, accounting for the new device, how it can help seniors and also alleviate family concern. Emphasize advantages for marketing and upsell, and also how your brand will appear more modern. Account for extra cost and potential downside; address the negatives your colleagues may be pondering as you speak. Then, conclude by sharing the specifics of your suggestion, which follows organically from the content of your segments. Sum up why you think your suggestion is the best course of action, and then, if you can, point to how your plan could lead the franchise in a new, exciting direction.

As you plan this presentation, you can express its structural elements in single sentences, which are easy to change and also to request feedback on from trusted colleagues or mentors. Because you were able to master this structure in an academic context, you are confident that you will be able to pull it off also among colleagues, so that your argument becomes both clear and convincing. And, if your presentation falls short, you know that your next presentation will be better, just like your second essay was better than your first. Or, encouraged by how your company decides to pilot your plan, based on the strength of your presentation alone, you decide to rely on the same structure for the speech you will make in your friend's wedding. To conclude, whether putting together a speech, a TED Talk, or a six-page narrative memo for your Amazon colleagues, you must first set up your exploration's world (Intro), then introduce conflict (Statement). Tell us how you will investigate this conflict (Method), and what we stand to learn (Purpose). Account for what you must, but get swiftly to your argument. Develop insights that build on each other (Segments). Then share what goes against your position (Counter) before you bring everything together to fulfill your purpose (Conclusion). Briefly remind us of what you achieved (Summary), end on a strong note (Twist), and drop the mic.

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Appendix A

Prezi presentation of essay and screenwriting model.
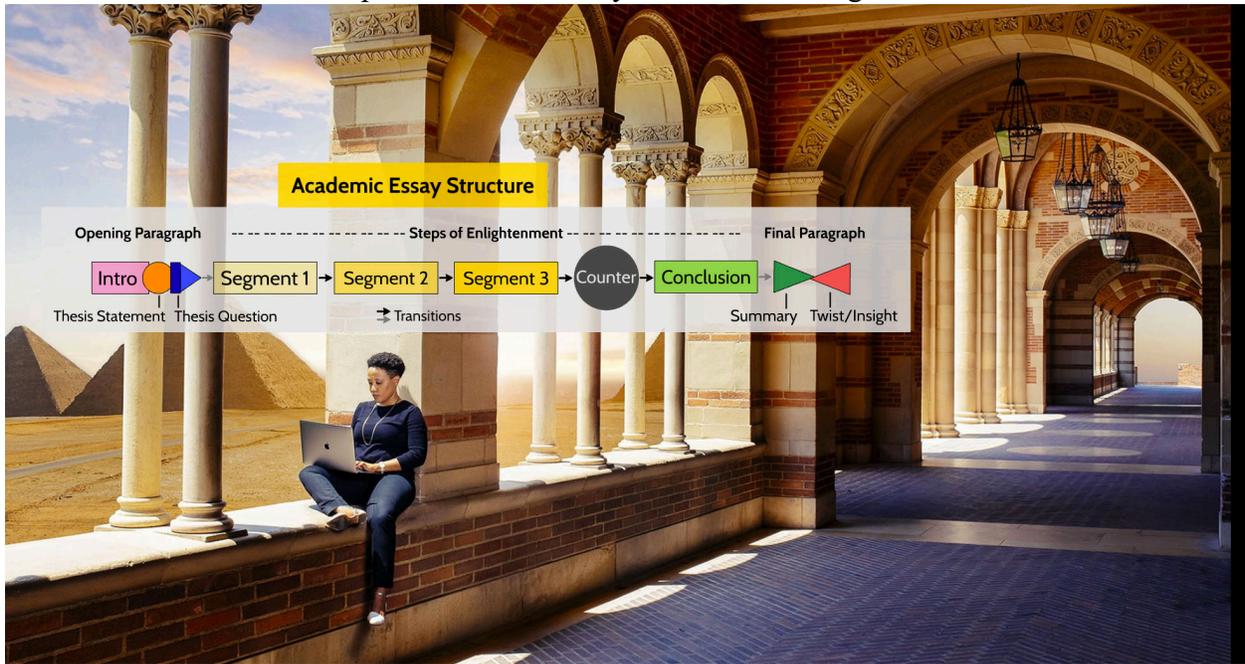
Link to Prezi presentation: https://prezi.com/view/9iIt8MhYxNCsYQrcy6df

Appendix B

Pedagogical one-page of essay structure.

Essay Structure

Effective academic essays are structured like all long-form storytelling, with an engaging beginning, a satisfying end, and a strategy for making the middle cohesive and meaningful. Focusing on a ***Thesis Question*** and ***Steps of Enlightenment*** helps students craft an ambitious argument that builds throughout, toward a significant and convincing conclusion. This model integrates a shared digital workspace with undergraduate classroom or online workshops.

Few rules govern essay writing and this model adds none; it is a practitioner's approach for identifying which structural elements students should focus on during development to optimize progress. The below illustration offers a good starting point, but structure is flexible and should be adapted to your essay's unique argument.

Opening Paragraph -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- Steps of Enlightenment -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- Final Paragraph

| Intro | | | Segment 1 | Seg. 2 | Seg. 3 | Counter | Conclusion | |

Thesis Statement   *Thesis Question*   *Transitions*   *Summary*   *Twist/ Insight*
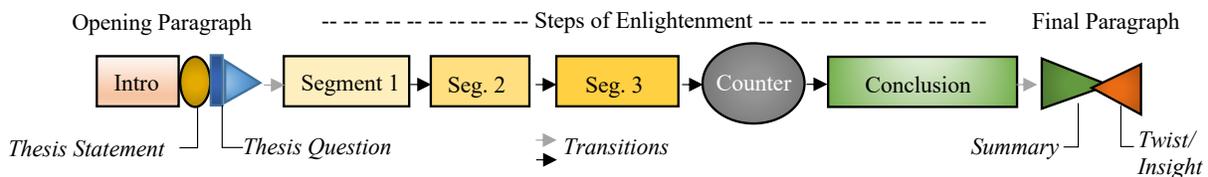
Introduction: Write what the reader needs to know to understand the relevance of your *Thesis Statement*.

Thesis Statement: Make a claim so specific or bold that a reasonable person could disagree with it. Focus on a topic for which you can offer significant insights and craft a complex argument.

Thesis Question: Let the reader know how you will investigate your *Statement*—and with the insights gleaned from this exploration—which question your *Conclusion* will answer.

Method: The *Question's Method* engages the core specificity of your *Statement*. Let us know how and where you will analyze both the presence and the absence of what your *Statement* claims.

Purpose: The *Question's Purpose* establishes what your exploration ultimately seeks to answer. A *Statement* gives all information away, but the *Purpose* only pitches what is to come.

Segment 1: Make the straight-forward case for the validity of your *Statement*. Begin with your argument, then draw in narrative from subject matter, or findings from other sources. Illustrate and build your claim. Can also be used to clarify method or concepts, or to offer additional introduction.

Segments: What a *Segment* concludes with should push toward what the next *Segment* explores. Make sure you have tight *Transitions* and a strong argumentative through-line. Each segment should make a new claim instead of reconfirming the previous claim with new examples.

Counter: Identify the premises of your position and make the intelligent *Counterargument*. Let the reader know why your perspective is still the most relevant. With particularly bold *Statements*, your *Counter* could come as early as in the second paragraph. It can also be spread out or omitted.

Conclusion: Your *Segments* developed the insights necessary for the reader to understand the complexity and significance of your *Conclusion*. After being led through these *Steps of Enlightenment*, the reader is now ready for you to make your most important point.

Final Paragraph: *Summarize* your argument. Then, ideally, make a *Twist* where you go from the specifics of your exploration to a more general application of insights gleaned. This must be prepared for, and a good *Twist* is difficult to execute. Alternatively, offer a *Final Insight* to end on a strong note.

For more, see Mads Larsen, "Workshopping Essay Structure: A Hollywood-Inspired Classroom and Online Model," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 32.3 (Open Access).

Appendix C

Pedagogical one-page of Hollywood structure.

HOLLYWOOD STRUCTURE

Most modern films structure their story around a protagonist's journey of self-realization. A problem forces the character to deal with a personal weakness, which must be overcome by making the right choice in an emotionally satisfying climax. **The Hollywood Structure** is a recipe for how this is achieved through applying narrative elements in a certain order.

This is one interpretation of this model. The closer to it you are able to mold your story, the more likely your film will be to endear audiences. Your application should not feel forced, and not all narratives fit the film medium. It is possible to ignore this structure yet still write a masterpiece, but this is not a recommended approach for beginners.

Act One		Act Two			Act Three	
10	25 min. or %	50		75		100
Set Up / **Decision**	**New World** / **Little Battle**	**Intensification**	**Big Gloom**	P **Big Battle**	**Final Battle**	R
Inciting Incident	*First Act Break*	*Mid Point*		*Second Act Break*		
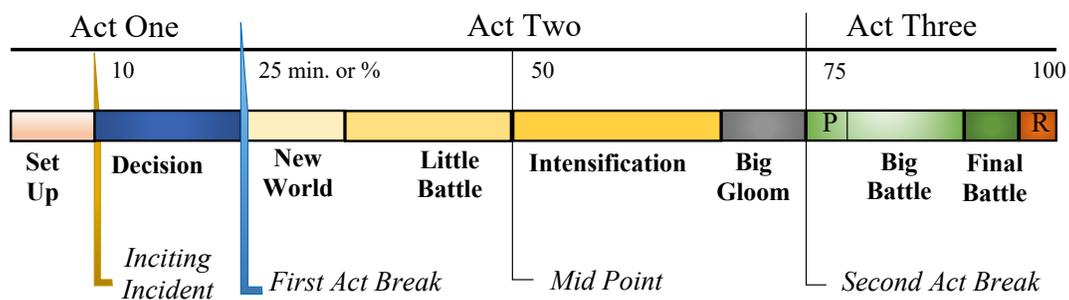
Set Up: Your protagonist struggles with a **PROBLEM** that is connected to her **WEAKNESS**. This character flaw prevents her from living as her true self and also leads to **BAD BEHAVIOR**. Sometimes a **GHOST**, which is an event in the past, holds your protagonist back.

Inciting Incident: Around minute 10, a *Call to Action* occurs, which the protagonist refuses or postpones accepting.

Decision: After a sequence of deliberation, she commits to her journey at the **FIRST ACT BREAK** by setting a goal that she will pursue until the climax in act three.

New World: The budding hero meets opponents and allies and learns the rules of her new world. She prepares for battle against her **ANTAGONIST** who is the ideal person to challenge her weakness.

Little Battle: She has not overcome her flaw, so your protagonist loses. Yet she gains something that lets her continue. At this **MID POINT**, she crosses the *Point of No Return* after which it is too late to go back to who she was. She must either change and win, or remain the same and face drastic defeat.

Intensification: Your hero keeps getting in worse trouble until she runs out of options.

Big Gloom: Isolated from her allies, all seems lost. Then, with the help of a mentor or ally, she gets one last chance at the **SECOND ACT BREAK**. In tragedies (where the weakness is not overcome), this sequence could be cheery instead of gloomy to contrast the ensuing unhappy ending.

Prep | Big Battle: After *Preparation*, all scores are settled and loose ends tied up, except the most important one.

Final Battle: Facing a **CLIMAX CHOICE**, the hero finally acts like a whole person by overcoming her weakness. She wins, but not without sacrificing something valuable earned during the journey.

Resolution: The hero lives as her new self, with **GOOD BEHAVIOR**. But a new seed of conflict is planted.

For more, see Mads Larsen, "Workshopping Essay Structure: A Hollywood-Inspired Classroom and Online Model," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 32.3 (Open Access).