



THE FINAL RECKONING OF THE STANFORD PRISON SAGA

PART 10: THE NARRATOLOGICAL METHOD

--- Hugo Meijers ---

I relied on narratological principles to review the Stanford Prison Saga. Narratology is the study of stories with a focus on persuasive elements that convey meaning. Although the art of how narrators communicate valuable lessons on behavior goes back to Aristotle and Plato — what doesn't in Western thinking — the discipline to systematically review and make sense of narratives is relatively new.

Now, what construes a narrative? I stick to two general dimensions — [essence and telling](#). The first is the message or moral that relays knowledge shaping our perception of reality. In science, this is generally the conclusion. The second is the [logical sequence of events](#) involving characters in pursuit of a goal.

More importantly, stories are a compilation of fiction and fact. So you might wonder, what does science have to do with storytelling? When you think about it, actually everything. Especially psychology as narrative art. Social science papers are crafted tales relaying research according to a prefixed format.

Scientific stories are thought to be rational explanations of an experiment or idea. Except every academic author knows that a dreary recital of abstract concepts and theoretical arguments does not strike a nerve. To get noticed, researchers craft an emotional experience using hyperbole and hype. Yet few come close to the drama-dripping storytelling of the Stanford Prison Experiment.



Moreover, contrary to mainstream beliefs, scientific writing does not pertain to facts. Reported research contains many fictional elements. Only the steps taken and the data collected can be considered factual. The rest is pure nonfiction. And nonfiction is still fiction — an imaginative re-creation of a constructed reality.

Consequently, every journal entry and convention abstract has traces of fabrication. For lack of a better word, let's call them [panfictionality](#). This is the view that no matter how factual, a narrator's imagination crafts a story with the illusion that it is true.

THE NARRATIVE LENS

Narratology provides a novel look at scientific stories — a defining lens to oversee the narrative territory. Reviewing a piece of academic literature boils down to mapping the lay of the land composed of the various accounts and everything else written about the story you are analyzing.

As such, the looking glass offers many advantages. Seeing with new eyes allows you to detect unexpected and unnoticed characteristics, like who is not doing what ought to be done, unbelievable things that make no sense, and discrepancies that do not add up. The narrative prism also provides a linguistic basis to formulate the results of a review.

Hence, scrutinizing the cleverly crafted Stanford Prison narrative using narratology was an obvious choice to unravel flaws and fabrications. But how does it work? A good starting point is to know which version you are reviewing. Is it the original where scenes are left out by the producer, the extended director's cut, or some remastered special to play a target audience?

Different accounts offer the opportunity to look for inconsistencies. Deviations and discrepancies between versions are clear red flags. Specifically, conflicting reports and scenes purposefully left out warrant further investigation.

The next step is overseeing the structure to understand which scenes are essential in making a tale compelling and memorable. Classic storytelling follows a basic 3-act structure — inciting introduction, the confrontation or climax, and the resolution. Master narrators use this powerful scripting format to captivate their audience.

Then the narratologist dissects the script into its story elements and [determines functions and relationships](#). Core components to map the narrative territory are scenes, characters, point of view, and plotlines.

DISSECTING COMPONENTS

In linear narratives scenes are presented in chronological order. The unfolding over time has the effect of gradually immersing the reader or listener in the daily life of the main characters to build tension and hold in suspense. But does the chain of events make sense, or do scenes feel artificially forced and inauthentic?

Looking into the systematic recitation of a series of events that propel a story can be very revealing. Yet, analyzing scenes is a double-edged endeavor. Intuitively, we look at what is in the frame, while just as revealing is the purposefully left out or missing footage. Anything damaging the plot or



diverting attention from the core message does not make the final cut in story scripting — a cardinal sin in science.

To spot event scripting, you place event structures under a narrative microscope. A simple and effective tool is the [pattern Dwight Swain devised](#). Scenes with a Goal – Conflict – Disaster pattern are followed up by a sequel consisting of Reaction – Dilemma – Decision. When this pattern emerges, you know you might be dealing with crafted fiction.

Next is character depiction. A gripping narrative requires characters that feel real and relatable. Otherwise, the [story falls flat](#). In grasping the players, you look at where they are from and their background. How are they physically portrayed? Which traits are they given and why? And what roles does a character play, especially behind the scenes? Moreover, action or observable behavior has the flip side of inaction. What a character refrains from doing is crucial in creating a compelling composition.

Then you review the narrative point of view or perspectives to determine who is telling the story. Viewpoints are a typical story element used to direct perception. Reviewers look for patterns in how an audience is guided to focus on what the narrator wants to emphasize.

Story creators use different perspectives to control how readers receive their work. The omniscient narrator nimbly switches between three viewpoints, each with a different effect. Autobiographically sharing personal experiences and private thoughts uses first-person I or we. The partaking storyteller allows the reader to relate.

The disembodied observer talks about others and writes in third-person singular or plural. Another option is letting the characters tell their own story. In science, this is adding anecdotes and testimonies to substantiate statements. These are worth checking for unreliable narration in [conflicting and self-contradicting lines](#). Begging the question and incorporating fallacies are clear markers of failed narration. So ask yourself whether utterances are valid?

Sometimes a narrator addresses the audience directly in the second person, often used to convince or instruct a course of action. Even so, in science it is tradition to write in the third person. Impersonal reports sound more rational, thus seem more objective. Academic authors tend to shy from subjective recollections, avoiding the impression of sharing opinions instead of generalized facts. When they become personal, you might be dealing with a red herring.

Arguably the most crucial component is the plot with its plotlines. In crafting a plot, narrators chronically suffer from confirmation bias. Only lines and events that contribute to the conclusion survive editing. In science, this is referred to as selective sampling.

Characters can follow different plotlines that reveal a narrator's motive to get specific audience responses. The way these lines interact is worth investigating. They are a valuable source of plot holes. For instance, incidents that defy logic, contradicting occurrences that do not add up, or impossible happenings within the timeline or place. Another example is unresolved storylines where characters appear out of thin air or disappear without serving a purpose. The unexpected appearance of prisoner Clay Ramsey on Wednesday night fits the bill.



COMPOSITION: GRASPING THE NARRATIVE

I selected some story elements and devised a two-stage investigative approach to comprehend the crafting of the Stanford Prison narrative. The first stage is getting an overview of the layout of the narrative land with its components. I dubbed it *Composition*. I called the second stage *Decomposition*, whereby I dissected the details to fact-check flagged items. This allowed me to detect possible flaws, falsification, and fabrication.

Let's begin with the *Composition* to give you an idea of how I used the narrative lens. To get my bearings, I started with what the so-called landmark study tells to shape our view of reality. The moral at first glance appears to be the conclusion that situational or systemic forces influence behavior. This message makes little sense as these pressures are devised social constructs for the sole purpose of directing the way people behave.

Still, on closer inspection, the life lesson seems Zimbardo's cautionary tale to be wary of the evil workings of social roles. Power over others can force someone to act out without being aware and in control. In other words, power corrupts minds resulting in power abuse. Hardly a novel notion.

Then I reviewed the official Stanford Prison narrative. It follows a traditional 3-act structure opening with the spectacular arrests involving the Palo Alto police. Gradually the tension builds of guard brutality spiraling out of control, causing powerless prisoners to break down. Guard tyranny led to the climax on the last night. Fortunately, the lover's confrontation returned Zimbardo's lost soul to reality. Back to his senses, protagonist Zimbardo terminates the suffering by prematurely releasing the prisoners.

All in all, the narrative is classic storytelling. The applied linear chronology bears all the markings of a scripted play. Overseeing the structure clarifies that the tale spins around the confrontation to support a premature end. When the climax falls through, the whole prison narrative shatters to pieces. And it did.

When I looked for different accounts of the tale, I found that the director's cut starts with the guard orientation on Saturday. In the afternoon, the staff indoctrinated and primed the students to act tough in a play for pay. This scene is left out of the official publications — a warning sign that obscure things happened.

Next in my endeavor, I dug up the many written-down accounts to spot the differences. I compared the slideshow narrative, the three original publications, Zimbardo's book *The Lucifer Effect*, Zimbardo's website account, and various versions in chapters and papers. Numerous discrepancies surfaced.

Comparing the various versions is tale-telling. Conflicting elements are caveats of possible fabrication. The same holds for details in one version of the tale that do not add up. When testimonies start contradicting, as was the case in the bathroom run on the last night in Zimbardo's book, you know things are off.

The many discrepancies helped me better grasp the forced fudging of a foregone conclusion. Conflicting tellings also gave me a list of dubious pivotal scenes, like Korpi's breakdown, the jailbreak



rumor, and the Parole Board hearings. Irreconcilable versions of those events got created over time, providing further indication of fabricated scenes.

Shifting through story elements

After getting the general layout of the land, I delved into the different components. When checking out the main characters, guards David Eshleman and John Mark catch the eye. They are cast as a classic hero-villain duo. Except who is who? Of course, everyone has met Douglas Korpi, despite his very early departure after 35 hours. He took center stage. We now know why.

However, Korpi's role tends to overshadow more revealing actors playing a prisoner that might have surprising things to tell. They are the extras loitering in the shadows of the story because the narrator does not place them in the spotlight.

From the side of the staff, Zimbardo forced himself to the forefront with his dissociative fugue. The situation and power of his prison role allegedly transformed him into the desensitized superintendent. Yet in his shadow lurks warden Jaffe. He did the legwork and played an obtrusive critical role ordering the guards around. Except this was not reported, raising further suspicion.

Analysis of the text revealed exuberant coloring with conspicuous prose. Most peculiar is the Pirandellian frame loaded with suggestive rhetoric to mesmerize a wider audience. Ramping rhetoric points toward dramatized fiction taking the upper hand. In fact, every theatrical addition immediately raises suspicion and requires further analysis.

Inspecting the plotlines under the magnifier helped to detect made-up scenes in the recreation of prison life. Although the emphasis was always on the students, with the supposedly brutal guards in the lead, a subtle third storyline of playacting psychologists backed up the inference of internalizing a social role. For seasoned psychologists, this seems unbelievable.

Where criticasters focused almost exclusively on roleplaying students, looking at the action and inaction of playacting researchers is far more revealing, as are plot holes in scenes that make no sense. For instance, guards gradually running out of control is only possible because the staff responsible for order allowed and solicited the behavior. In this case, the derelict of duty of the participating psychologists casts serious doubt on the validity of brutality spiraling out of control and raises the evil of inaction as a possible explanation.

Looking at event structures illustrated, for example, that the last night confrontation follows Swain's scene-sequel pattern. Meeting nice guard Eshleman and later seeing he was transformed into the brutal John Wayne is the scene. The sequel that follows is the emotional confrontation leading to the awakening and clearheaded decision to terminate. Korpi's rumor triggering the sequences of events on Tuesday follows the same pattern. Such patterns hint at event scripting.

Remember that writers use different narrative points of view to control how readers receive their work. Here Zimbardo opted for the omniscient narrator drawing the susceptible reader in the prison reality of power corrupting the mind. The authors nimbly stepped in and out of the story, switching between the first-person playactor (I and we) and the third-person researcher explaining observations.



As the master crafters of the tale, they theatrically shared personal experiences while at the same time trying to come across as credible and objective researchers. Switching viewpoints reveals a confound conflict of interest, indicating the guards were set up. The conflict of interest also opened the door to investigate the possibility of a planned end. After all, Zimbardo's epiphany after internalizing his role as superintendent is at the heart of this conflict.

Composition rules

The *Composition* delivers a list of flaws flagging possible fiction in the story that need further fact-checking. To recap, I used the following guidelines to map the narrative territory:

- **Do not try to debunk.** Be more an art critic than an academic commentary. Look through enchanted eyes, not analytical goggles. Submerge in the captivating story world in search of added fiction to make a sensational story stick;
- **Review a narrative.** Follow the storylines that shape the plot. Evaluate the coda and twists. Study the narrative properties like structure, text composition, character portrayal, point of view, and sequence of events;
- **Compare different versions.** Evaluate how storytelling evolved. Check retellings for similarities and disparities to detect gross inconsistencies. By definition, discrepancies are mental (re)constructions. Some are due to failing memory; some are blatant lies;
- **Follow all characters.** Survey every character, especially those hiding in the background. Focus on roles of paramount importance in propelling actual and trope events. Analyze the working of different settings on the roles played to see if players fall out of character;
- **Check for conflicting roles.** The roles of narrator, producer, paying principal, researcher, and participant produce a toxic mixture for a false narrative. Conflict of interest gives story creators a poetic license to lie with impunity without presenting facts;
- **Focus on scenes that propel a story forward.** Ask why is this scene here? If it is too convenient or obtrusive, it is likely displaced, distorted, or directed. Flag such events for further investigation to distinguish fiction from fact;
- **When forced to focus, zoom out.** Be wary of the illusionist who misdirects attention to mask what is happening overall. Foremost, when asked to focus on a handpicked item, you better look around because the action is elsewhere;
- **Look through different lenses.** Place valid sounding arguments in proper context to oversee the bigger picture. Avoid getting sidelined by one (behaviorist) point of view. Specifically, look for cognitive clues of individual choices the students made to make sense of their various decisions;
- **Inspect the role of the narrator(s).** Observe the narrator's cognitive stance towards the characters in terms of them, we and I. Be mindful of sudden changes between reiterator, role-player and researcher to direct perception of the audience. ;
- **Verify discarded data.** Analyze the video and audio recordings and find the scenes that were left out in the different versions of the narrative. Try to assess why they did not make those accounts of the story. It points are how audiences got played;
- **Mind framing and paraphrasing.** Watch for sly shifts in wording or the introduction of a new concept that seems a legitimate argument. Rewriting history, like claiming the psychologists should not have participated, is a dead giveaway that something is amiss;



- **Look for plot holes.** Follow story twists and look for tale-telling errors in the narrative. Dead giveaways are scenes that do not add up, come across as too artificial, feel exceptionally convenient in the plotline, or are in plain contradiction;
- **Scrutinize punchlines.** Detect one-liners used to disseminate a narrative. Identify Payoffs, like good turning evil, that create an image or personal brand. In Zimbardo's case Dr. Evil. They warrant researching because things are not always what they are made out to be.

DECOMPOSITION: SCRUTINIZING THE DETAILS

Spotting suspicious elements in a piece of literature is not rocket science. Proving them, however, is an entirely different matter. Warning signs must be investigated by painstakingly sifting through archived data and cross-checking publications. Only meticulous fact-checking of the validity and credibility of flagged findings can provide ironclad proof of what is true and false. Let me give you some examples.

The *Composition* revealed that the tension built-up and confrontation climax are crucial to the narrative. Without these scenes, there is no story. Therefore it makes sense to focus on these two events. First behavior spinning out of control. Under scrutiny, brutality did not stand up. The recordings and transcripts show nothing disconcerting went on. They do show that the researchers captured only the unusual cinematics.

Irrespective of the limited recordings, the most brutal guard was recorded every night during his shift. But the evidence shows that the character traits attributed to brutal John Wayne are fantasized. The videos show he was merely hamming his hazing experience and portraying a poor substitute of the portrayed tyrant. He only had about an hour to play around. The rest of the time the prisoners were involved in scheduled events or asleep.

Furthermore, the recordings of Wednesday and Thursday are intermixed. The data is doctored. I also found that Thursday's events are attributed to Wednesday to support guard brutality spiraled out of control. Why did Zimbardo need to falsify the timeline? After checking the debriefings, I discovered that by Wednesday nothing noteworthy was happening.

The actual data further disclosed that the staff was non-stop present, often prancing the prison yard. Combine this with the researchers playing prison superiors but not intervening leads to the irrefutable collapse of the power hierarchy to maintain order. Claiming powerless guards were brutal while power-wielding psychologists were responsible for order stuck out like a sore thumb. The situational attribution turned out to be a deliberate fatal attribution error.

Analysis of the climax began with Jacco sharing the staff told him at 8 p.m. on Thursday that the simulation was about to end. His disclosure of a planned end makes the reported finale impossible. The corroboration I found illustrated that the premature termination was preordained. Zimbardo decided earlier to stop. Not only that. Irrefutable evidence proves the climax starting with the bathroom run is false.

Besides focusing on these two events, my survey of the different versions playing target audiences was most illuminating. Take the journal papers, where the researchers reported that the most important scene is the Parole Board hearing. Yet this critical scene is left out in the New York Times



magazine article for the general public. Why is this? Diving into the depths disclosed two accounts: one versus two meetings for five or eight prisoners. These differences are impossible to explain away.

So on the supposition that everything reported served a purpose to direct perception, conflicting accounts and contradictions are unmistakable fabrications. Even so, it is always possible that one version is closer to the mark. Here you have to follow the evidence. The data supports that there were two hearings with eight prisoners. Why the researchers reported the wrong account in the official journal papers is unfathomable.

Reviewing events twists to rattle a target audience resulted in several eyebrow-raising dramatizations. Such over-the-top scenes require follow-up. Take the absurd reference to Nazi concentration camp punishment when prisoners were doing push-ups. Surveying the guard orientation revealed that doing push-ups was suggested by the staff for morning exercise and discipline. The reference was clearly fantasized to strike a sensitive nerve.

Naturally, the sudden appearance around 2004 of simulated sodomy on the last night orchestrated by the infamous John Wayne required fact-checking. This was very easy. Zimbardo has consistently maintained that the incredible camel humping scene is on video. All I had to do was check the recording and transcript. On camera, you can witness some prisoners engaging in innocent leapfrogs while having fun.

The last example concerns realizing scenes that do not confirm the conclusion are left out — an edited narrative is seriously biased. Did the researchers discard crucial contradicting data? The file with guard anecdotes and quotable quotes testifies to severe selective sampling, fueling my search for scenes and quotes left out. I found numerous testimonies telling different tales. Especially the debriefings disclosed that everything not purporting the foregone conclusion got swept under the rug.

Decomposition rules

Decomposing a composed piece of literature results in ironclad proof of falsification and fabrication. I used the following rules to scrutinize the available online material:

- **Ignore overt drama.** Do not get sidetracked by trivial theatrics in a dramaturgy. Discard overly emotional content. They are often part of plot thickening. Keep your eye on the veracity of the story to prove fiction;
- **Fact-check details that raise eye-browse.** Listen to your gut signaling red flags. When something strikes an emotional nerve, follow it up. Foremost, if something smells fishy, it is usually a red herring;
- **Double-check the findings of others.** Do not blindly copy-paste alleged claims of found flaws. Stay out of the echo chamber where people parrot without verification. Cut through the noise and separate the wheat from the chaff. Reserve judgment, relentlessly corroborate the facts and avoid jumping to conclusions;
- **Triple-check anecdotes.** Rumors, hearsay, testimony, and quotes are easily fudged. Do not accept flimsy uncorroborated statements or rely on a single source. That opens the door to false allegations. Lack of proof is proof of fabrication;



- **Dig till you hit bottom.** Investigate the purpose of a reported frame but avoid taking things at face value. Repeatedly ask why is this portrayed at all and in this way to get to the bottom of things;
- **When in doubt, go to the source.** When faced with discrepancies or inconsistencies, it pays to return to the original files. Be sure to compare transcripts against audio or video material. Elements might be left out, and data can be falsified;
- **Shave disputes with Occam's razor.** Complexity obscures simple truths. When veracity has multiple contenders in conflicting accounts or various ideas compete, the simplest straightforward version is often closest to the mark;
- **Look for recurring patterns.** Once you spend enough time filtering facts from fiction, you get a knack for someone's idiosyncrasies. Generally, as is our nature, methods of emphasizing, cloaking, dramatizing, directing and misdirecting are reused;
- **Apply reverse psychology.** Flip things and think the unthinkable. Assume scenes are the opposite of how they are portrayed to see if that makes more sense. When it does tenaciously find evidence for the alternative;
- **Survey reactions.** The way someone responds to criticism is most instructive. Faulty or single-sided reasoning is a clear marker for deliberate deception. Data in an argument is worth verifying;
- **Look at motive.** Concentrate on intent, not content, to detect the masking of a lie. Especially silence is tale-telling and enlightening. Hidden in the dark lurk nuggets which can't stand the light of day. Be aware that hiding in plain sight can be a ruse;
- **Inspect linguistic clues.** Building a false narrative leaves clues, like out-of-context negation (events that did not happen). Other examples are suggestive leading questions, blame-shifting, unsound links, strange emphasis, unsubstantiated insinuation, misplaced innuendo, and suggestive supposition;
- **Investigate hyperbolic language.** Lofty claims, inflated statements, muzzling replies, categorical denials, hubris denouncements, and demeaning personality portrayals reveal anxiety. Fear of getting caught out or feeling embarrassed hints at something out of order.

Narratology is a novel way of scrutinizing narrated science papers. Feel free to use the narrative lens to analyze other scientific storytelling. There are plenty out there with disputable story elements that point at crafted fiction.

The Final Reckoning continues. Numerous design flaws surfaced during my investigation. It would be a shame to lay them to waste. The unveiling of these flaws will be incorporated in my upcoming free e-book, downloadable from www.graspyourself.com.

Previous articles of The Final Reckoning of the Stanford Prison Saga:

Part 1: [The Aftermath of The Lifespan of a Lie](#)

Part 2: [David Eshleman's deepfake](#)

Part 3: [John Mark's insubordination](#)



Part 4: [Douglas Korpi on trial](#)

Part 5: [An orchestrated apotheose](#)

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