

What makes for a good journal article, and how to turn your talk into one (and vice versa)

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An experiment in genre analysis

The end: raised consciousness about what's involved in writing a journal article

The means: a close-ish look at a superior example of the genre, Steve Shapin's "Descartes the doctor: rationalism and its therapies", *BJHS* 2000 33 (131-154)

(generally: find good models)

Why Shapin? (1) He's a very skilful and successful writer
(2) He's written a manifesto for better writing (and talking) in the field (*Isis* June 2005, 238-43)
(3) His paper combines history of science/medicine

Structure

Overview of the article and how it's put together (abstract, structure)

Closer look at particular elements within it

[Time permitting] Group exercise: what might a 20min-talk based on this article look like?

[Time permitting] Pull it all together and reverse direction
(Bonus: Schaffer's 4 top tips!)

Introducing “Descartes the doctor”

Shapin’s abstract

“During the Scientific Revolution one important gauge of the quality of reformed natural philosophical knowledge was its ability to produce a more effective medical practice. Indeed, it was sometimes thought that philosophers who pretended to possess new and more potent philosophical knowledge might display that possession in personal health and longevity. René Descartes repeatedly wrote that a better medical practice was a major aim of his philosophical enterprise. He said that he had made important strides towards achieving that aim and, on that basis, he offered practical medical advice to others and advertised the expectation that, taking his own advice, he would live a very long time. This paper describes what Cartesian medicine looked like in practice and what that practice owed to the power of modernist Reason.”

n.b. structure in these 5 sentences:

- (1) Makes a general point about the SR [*medical efficacy widely accepted as a test of the truthfulness of a natural philosophy*]
- (2) Narrows down the general point [*it was personal!*]
- (3) Introduces specific case of the general point [*Descartes accepted the challenge of showing his principles medically useful*]
- (4) Narrows down the specific case [*it was personal*]
- (5) Brief description of the contents

what else?

honours stress position, at macro- and micro-levels;
see, e.g., sentence 5
plenty of Anglo-Saxon words, monosyllabic words;
again, see sentence 5
uncomplicated grammar
[Schaffer tip no. 1!]

what’s he accomplished?

he’s told us what his paper’s about
he’s (first, at greater length) told us why it’s
interesting, by setting out broader context
[Schaffer tip no. 2!]

Structure of the paper (as revealed in subsection titles)

Very interesting: two, nested introductions and two, nested conclusions, sandwiching the content – again, big effort in making manifest how cool is the content

Structure made explicit, but not hugely so, and only incidentally; the abstract is thus put to work structurally

General introduction (“Philosophy and its medical point”)

Specific introduction (“Infallible demonstration: Descartes’s medical project”)

Final sentence, final paragraph: “I want first [1] to consider how Descartes acted as his own physician and then [2] to detail and interpret the range of concrete dietetic and therapeutic advice he gave his associates.”

Content 1 (“Descartes his own physician”)

Content 2: intro (“Descartes prescribes”)

2.1 (“The dietetics of pure sense”)

2.2 (“Looking at the bright side of life: managing the passions”)

Specific conclusion (“Custom and reason in Descartes’s medical practice”)

General conclusion (“Curing or enduring?”)

n.b. several qualities here already seen in the abstract

symmetry put to work structurally
unfrightening language (“point” vs “legitimation”)
content embedded in reaching-out discussions; heading off the “Cooter question” at the pass...

A closer look at sundry elements, including

Conformity to journal style [Schaffer tip no. 3!], including length etc., frequency of subsections etc.

Introductory paras that sweep the reader in [Appendix 1]

...while we're looking at the introduction, notice:

those A-S monosyllables again
 the humour
 the confidence/chutzpah (aspire to aphorism...)
 the footnotes (ca. 90 overall, about 3-5 per published page)

...while we're looking at the footnotes, notice, p. 1, how many there are, and how varied and interesting they are

further-reading footnotes
 source-citation footnotes
 qualification-digression footnotes

n.b. too that, on the whole, the footnotes are where Shapin engages the relevant secondary literatures [Schaffer tip no. 4!] – not very common

Transitions that connect the section just past with the one being introduced

e.g. start of Spec intro: “Descartes’s vision of the practical medical goods that would certainly be delivered to those possessed of right philosophical reason was more clear, coherent and ambitious than that of any other seventeenth-century intellectual modernizer.” – reaches back to what’s just been said about Bacon, Boyle, SR figures generally

Playful, imaginative writing that remains empirically and intellectually disciplined [Appendix 2]

[Time permitting] Your turn: how might one turn the above into a 20-min talk? What about moving in the other direction?