ONCE UPON A TRANSACTION: NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES AND DRAFTING*

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I. Introduction

A granddaughter joins the family business as a partner. An entrepreneur licenses his newest product. Two parties decide to settle a dispute. A charitable idea materializes as a private foundation. A parent's belief in the power of education is perpetuated by a trust agreement. Each of these events forms a narrative. A transaction is more than the scratch of pens across signature pages or the click of keys to email an executed document. A transaction is itself a story. These stories, made with provisions and clauses, result in the formation of contracts, agreements, and wills. Conceptualizing transactions as narratives benefits the negotiation, drafting, implementation, interpretation, and, ultimately, enforceability of the transactional document.

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This article showcases the use of narrative techniques applicable to the drafting of transactional documents. Tethered to the fundamental principles of good drafting, the article will highlight the use of stock stories, plot and narrative movement, character, point of view, narrative setting, themes, and motifs across a spectrum of transactional documents.

II. Narrative and Legal Writing

Narrative draws from the disciplines of literature, composition, rhetoric, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience. While some may equate narrative with fiction, the term narrative is broader and references a variety of texts—both literary and nonliterary. In general, narrative refers to a series of events relayed by a narrative agent. At least a few scholars, including Jerome Bruner, posit that narrative is an innate process of the human brain. From this perspective, life is lived in a series of narratives constructed about ourselves and our environment. Whether or not narrative is an innate process of the brain, narrative is certainly a predominant method employed to distill and disseminate information. Even a cursory review of popular culture and media reveals extensive use and reliance on the power of

1. Narratology is defined as “the theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story.’” MIEKE BAL, NARRATOLOGY: INTRODUCTION TO THE THEORY OF NARRATIVE 3 (2d ed. 1997).
2. E.g., ROBERT SCHOLE, JAMES PHELAN & ROBERT KELLOGG, THE NATURE OF NARRATIVE 9 (40th anniversary ed., rev. and expanded 2006) (noting that the novel is one example of the narrative tradition that “can be traced back five thousand years”).
3. SCHOLE ET AL., supra note 2, at 4 (identifying the two core characteristics of narrative as “the presence of a story and a story-teller”); Jerome Bruner, The Narrative Construction of Reality, 18 CRITICAL INQUIRY 1, 6 (1991) (“A narrative is an account of events occurring over time.”). But see Derek H. Kierman-Johnson, A Shift to Narrativity, 9 LEGAL COMM. & RHETORIC: JALWD 81 (2012) (exploring the use of the terms narrative, story, and storytelling).
narrative. Narrative techniques facilitate the composition and production of an accessible, and often memorable, text. For those reasons, narrative has been of interest to a variety of disciplines, including law.6

III. Applicability of Narrative Techniques to Transactional Drafting

As James Boyd White wrote,

[T]he law always begins in story: usually in the story the client tells, whether he or she comes in off the street for the first time or adds in a phone call another piece of information to a narrative with which the lawyer has been long, perhaps too long, familiar. It ends in story too, with a decision by a court or jury, or an agreement between the parties, about what happened and what it means.7

Over the last twenty years, the applicability of narrative to the law8 has been explored by adapting narrative techniques to the development, composition, and production of a variety of litigation-based documents, both at the trial level9 and the appellate level.10 These documents include

5. See generally ARTHUR ASA BERGER, NARRATIVES IN POPULAR CULTURE, MEDIA, AND EVERYDAY LIFE 1-4, 14-16 (1997); see also BAL, supra note 1, at 220 (noting that “omnipresence of narrative in culture”).


pleadings, briefs, and victim impact statements.¹¹ In contrast, the applicability of narrative techniques to transactional drafting has yet to be fully explored.¹²

Reluctance to use narrative techniques when drafting transactional documents may be a result of a number of factors. First, many drafters unduly constrain the purpose of both narrative techniques and transactional documents—often viewing the two as inapposite to each other. For instance, narrative techniques are often erroneously considered to apply only to the telling of “fictional” events.¹³ Similarly, transactional documents may be automatically classified as expository texts (that is, texts designed to inform) rather than narrative texts (designed to relay a story).¹⁴ However,


¹². The current scholarship acknowledges the potential applicability but does not yet fully explore the potential and problems. See, e.g., Carolyn Grose, Storytelling Across the Curriculum: From Margin to Center, from Clinic to the Classroom, 7 J. ASS’N LEGAL WRITING DIRECTORS 37, 57 (2010) (describing her efforts to infuse narrative into a variety of courses, including an estate planning course so that “students [are] moved from seeing their jobs in drafting these forms as simply checking boxes and filling in blanks, to constructing stories that accurately reflected their client’s goals . . . .”); Mae Kuykendall, No Imagination: The Marginal Role of Narrative in Corporate Law, 55 BUFF. L. REV. 537 (2007).


a document’s classification as either expository or narrative does not foreclose its use for narrative techniques. Indeed, a hasty categorization of transactional documents as expository texts obscures the value that narrative techniques can offer to the process of relaying important information. Additionally, a classification of a text as either expository or narrative assumes those categories are mutually exclusive, which they need not be. A transactional document may indeed contain both expository and narrative text, further highlighting the impact of narrative techniques.

Furthermore, drafters may fear that using narrative techniques will increase the quantity of information in the transactional document and introduce inaccurate or conflicting information, thus creating ambiguity, promoting litigation, or increasing transaction costs. To compound the problem, many erroneously consider transactional documents to be static, thus supporting the reluctance to alter or shy away from the use of commonly-accepted forms. Again, however, these concerns should not trump the value that narrative techniques offer. While the use of forms are certainly a component of drafting, so too are creativity, invention, and

15. The differences between expository and narrative texts may be exaggerated. For an examination of the overlapping characteristics of categories of texts, see William Grabe, Narrative and Expository Macro Genres, in Genre in the Classroom: Multiple Perspectives 249-67 (Ann M. Johns ed., 2002). See also Michael B.W. Wolfe & Joshua M. Woodwyk, Processing and Memory of Information Presented in Narrative or Expository Texts, 80 Brit. J. of Educ. Psychol. 341, 357 (2010) (acknowledging that readers may be influenced by the presentation of information using a particular genre).


19. See Rivka Grundstein-Amado, Narrative Inquiry: A Method for Eliciting Advance Health Care Directives, 8 Humane Med. 31 (1992) (acknowledging that the use of narrative will take more time but noting that the benefit is “responsible evaluation and self-critical reflection”).
innovation. The creative use of narrative techniques allows for the continued development, refinement, and improvement of documents and allows attorneys to better tailor those documents to individual transactions.

Once these misconceptions are removed, drafters can see yet another benefit narrative techniques offer: opportunities and strategies to engage clients. Narrative techniques further the attorney-client relationship by promoting a closer examination of individual client goals and designing documents to further those goals. It should be remembered that not only the drafting but also the negotiation, implementation, interpretation, and enforceability of a transactional document may benefit from conceptualizing transactions as narratives. After all, at the heart of all transactions is a client’s story. Deliberate use of narrative techniques in the drafting of transactional documents acknowledges the presence of this story and leverages its presence to further the intent of the parties.


21. E.g., Foster & Grant, supra note 20, at 408 (positing that encouraging creative approaches to drafting means that “students will be better prepared to view a client’s needs as individualized rather than something that can be adequately addressed by rote fill-in-the-blank drafting.”); see also Sue Payne, Basic Contract Drafting Assignments: A Narrative Approach, at xxii (Vicki Been et al. eds., 2011) (encouraging drafting students to consider “[w]hat is happening in this client’s story?”).

22. For example, Professor Daniel Barnett wrote,

All transactions involve a story that includes the different parties; what their roles are in the transaction; the obligations and rights of those parties; and the consequences if certain actions are taken or not. Using the narrative as an organizing principle is often the simplest way to structure an agreement.

Daniel L. Barnett, Putting Skills into Practice: Legal Problem Solving and Writing for New Lawyers 107-08 (Vicki Been et al. eds., 2014).
IV. Featured Techniques and Examples

This article showcases the following six narrative techniques: (1) stock stories, (2) plot and narrative movement, (3) character, (4) point of view, (5) narrative setting, and (6) themes and motifs. Each technique will be defined, and its potential use in drafting transactional documents will be illustrated through examples of various transactional documents that incorporate these techniques.

A. Stock Stories

Stock stories are prototypes that serve as core patterns, or models, for individual stories. These stories are influenced, developed, and retained by cultural, historical, and personal experiences. The characters in these


narratives become archetypes, and ultimately stereotypes, with character traits readily identified by the audience. For instance, characters wearing black hats are easily identified as villains or antagonists. But such automatic identification may also prevent the audience from engaging with the narrative, especially when the antagonist is not wearing a black hat. These narrative shortcuts influence audience perceptions of and engagement with the narrative.

In the context of transactional drafting, stock stories may discourage the use of certain types of documents because of a client’s preconceived notion about the stories projected by those documents. Moreover, attorneys choosing to employ these types of documents may be shortchanging their usefulness by failing to customize them to reflect the clients’ specific goals. An example of this effect can be seen in whether and how clients use premarital and marital agreements.


27. E.g., Jack Myers & Michael Simms, The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms 289 (Longman ed., 1989) [hereinafter Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms] (defining a “stock character” as “a conventional character or STEREOTYPE whose traits have been established by many authors and whose recognition by the audience relies on STOCK RESPONSE”).

28. Id. at 289 (listing examples of stock characters, including “the villain, the ne’er-do-well, the fair lady in distress, the rich fop, the wicked stepmother, the braggart soldier . . . , the hermit, the taciturn father, and the hard-bitten yeoman”).

29. Morant, supra note 13, at 26-27 (referencing use of stereotypes and other narrative short cuts in the bargaining process).

30. For example, one scholar posits that viewing nurses in relation to stock story characters, such as “ministering angel” or “doctor’s handmaiden” undermines the status of nurses and fails to provide a legal framework under which a nurse’s professional opinion is accorded weight. Mary Chiarella, Silence in Court: The Devaluation of the Stories of Nurses in the Narratives of Health Law, 7 Nursing Inquiry 191, 192-93, 198 (2000).

As defined by the Uniform Premarital and Marital Agreement Act, a premarital, or prenuptial, agreement is “an agreement between individuals who intend to marry which affirms, modifies, or waives a marital right or obligation during the marriage or at separation, marital dissolution, death of one of the spouses, or the occurrence or nonoccurrence of any other event.”

Dating from medieval times, premarital agreements were originally conceived to detail the financial and non-financial responsibilities in the “economic alliances between families that were created by marriage.”

Although of historic vintage, the modern use of the prenuptial agreement was initially met with resistance from the judiciary and the legislature. American courts were reluctant to enforce terms of prenuptial agreements because the agreements were seen as encouraging divorce and the preparation of which “suggested the contemplation of divorce at the very outset of marriage.” Even today, the preparation of a prenuptial agreement is often interpreted as an acknowledgment by the couple that the marriage is likely to end in divorce.

The stock story of the prenuptial agreement is that a miser, wishing to retain all of his or her wealth, suggests a prenuptial agreement in anticipation of the marriage ending in divorce. Because they are reluctant to view themselves as misers, individuals may not suggest the creation of a prenuptial agreement. In addition, clients may presume that use of prenuptial agreements is limited to high-net-worth individuals, specifically


33. See Guggenheimer, supra note 31, at 147.


35. DiFonzo & Stern, supra note 34, at 33.

36. See, e.g., Sam Marguiles, The Psychology of Prenuptial Agreements, 31 J. PSYCHIATRY & L. 415, 423 (2003) (“The perceived need for the prenuptial agreement suggests that the couple will have problems with issues of family interference, trust, sharing, power or intimacy.”); see also Florence Kaslow, Enter the Prenuptial: A Preclude to Marriage or Remarriage, 9 BEHAV. SCI. & L. 375, 380 (1991).
to protect them from the stock characters of Gigolos and Jezebels. In terms of stock stories, the stereotypes of the miser, trickster, and the femme fatale may be further obscuring the value of prenuptial agreements to a broad spectrum of clients. Understanding the susceptibility of audiences to stock-story references, whether conscious or unconscious, enables the drafter to take deliberate steps to reframe a document’s purpose and the nature of its provisions so as to supplant the stock story with a fully developed narrative applicable to the individual client.

Rather than acknowledging the inevitability of divorce, prenuptial agreements should promote an assessment of the marriage. Prenuptial agreements can foster the formation and continuation of marriages by tackling one of the last remaining taboo topics of our society: money. In our culture, money is often addressed in hushed tones or avoided entirely. For instance, discussion of salaries among co-workers is avoided if not actively forbidden. Likewise, families avoid talking about money. Yet, disagreements about finances are one of the top reasons that couples seek counseling and one of the top reasons that couples divorce. For that

38. See, e.g., Jerome H. Poliacoff, What Does Love Have to Do with It?, 33 FAM. ADVOC. 12, 13 (2011) (summarizing study that demonstrates that “most people do not see themselves as needing, or benefiting from, prenuptial agreements”); Sean Hannon Williams, Sticky Expectations: Responses to Persistent Over-Optimism in Marriage, Employment Contracts, and Credit Card Use, 84 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 733, 734 (2009) (noting that the cost for over-optimism is “the failure to adequately self-insure against future negative events”). For a consideration of how the myth of “death with dignity” interferes with individual’s understanding and consideration of advance directives, see Rebecca Dresser, Shiavo and Contemporary Myths About Dying, 61 U. MIAMI L. REV. 821, 821, 845 (2007); Steven I. Friedland, The Health Care Proxy and the Narrative of Death, 10 J.L. & HEALTH 95, 100-01, 106-08, 144 (1995-1996).
41. Atwood, supra note 39, at 11 (“In many couple relationships, money is more taboo than sex.”).
42. Id. at 11-12; see also Alan J. Hawkins, Brian J. Willoughby & William J. Doherty, Reasons for Divorce and Openness to Marital Reconciliation, 53 J. DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE 453, 453, 455, 458-61 (2012) (identifying “growing apart,” “not able to talk together,” and money issues as often cited reasons in the study).
reason, disagreements about financial goals and misunderstandings about
the economic responsibilities of the couple should be identified before
marriage. While all marriages eventually terminate, either upon divorce or
death, a document that clarifies the financial aspects of the relationship
could promote the formation of lasting marriages.\(^4^3\)

As mentioned above, a stock story preconception may be supplanted
with a specific story by reframing the document’s purpose. The following is
a standard recital in a prenuptial agreement that does not reframe the

A. Marriage is intended soon between the parties.
B. Each party desires, before entering into the marriage, to know
just what the rights of property are to be in each other’s estate.\(^4^4\)

These recitals are accurate but fail to present a narrative that is beneficial
to the parties. Instead, the recital plays into the stock story of a trickster or
miser by focusing attention on the fact that, before entering the marriage,
the parties want to know “what the rights of property are to be”—as though
creating the marital relationship is contingent on receiving or renouncing
particular property rights.

The recitals may instead consciously reframe the narrative by
acknowledging the beneficial aspect of the agreement, as in the following:

Each party acknowledges and stipulates the purpose of this
Agreement is not to promote or procure a divorce or dissolution
of marriage, but to provide for marital tranquility by agreeing on
the property and support rights of each other at the
commencement of the marriage. The parties have determined
that the marriage between them shall have a better chance of
success if the rights and claims that accrue to each of them as a
result of their marriage are determined and finalized by this
Agreement.\(^4^5\)

\(^4^3\) Atwood, supra note 39, at 2, 11-12; see also Alison A. Marston, Planning for Love:

\(^4^4\) 5 AM. JUR. LEGAL FORMS 2D Prenuptial Property Agreement—Barring All Rights in
Property of Other Spouse—Reserving Property of Both for Themselves—Subject to Certain

\(^4^5\) 20 FRANK L. MCGUANE, JR. & KATHLEEN A. HOGAN, Drafting the Agreement Not to
Encourage Dissolution, in COLO. PRAC., FAMILY LAW & PRACTICE § 39:7 Drafting the
Direct acknowledgment that the intent of the Agreement “is not to promote or procure divorce” but to promote “marital tranquility” reframes the narrative and replaces the stock story.

A form’s prefatory material can also evidence the intent of a drafter. Consider the narrative formed by a title such as “Drafting the Agreement—Not to Encourage Dissolution.” Similarly, the example below attempts to refocus the goal of the prenuptial agreement.

HUSBAND and WIFE intend to be life-long partners. HUSBAND and WIFE will devote their best efforts to the creation of a successful marriage.

HUSBAND and WIFE intend this Agreement to enhance their marriage, by freeing them from concerns and disputes regarding their post-marriage financial obligations to one another. Both parties believe that disagreement regarding financial matters can gravely impair a marriage. The parties believe that the potential for future discord regarding financial matters can be reduced or eliminated if, before they marry, they agree on the terms of their financial obligations to one another. The parties also believe the Agreement will give them peace of mind, by fixing their rights and duties concerning separate property and support obligations should, despite their best efforts, the marriage end in divorce or other dissolution. The parties expressly agree that this Agreement is not made in contemplation of, or to encourage or facilitate, a separation or divorce.

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Agreement—Not to Encourage Dissolution (2d ed. 2012) (omitting “whereas” from the form language). The authors also suggest another variation of the recital:

WHEREAS, the parties, to promote marital tranquility, desire to fix, limit, and determine by this Agreement the interest, rights, and claims that may accrue to each of them in the property and estate of the other by reason of their marriage or in the event of marital difficulties herein referred to, and to accept the provisions of this Agreement in lieu and in full discharge, settlement, and satisfaction, of any and all interests, rights, and claims that otherwise each might or could have under the law, in and to the property and estate of the other, both before and after the other’s death.

Id. § 41:57.
46. Id. § 39:7.
Beginning the prenuptial agreement with a recital or introductory remark about intentions presents opportunities to reframe the purpose of the prenuptial agreement and override the stock story.

Indeed, a drafter has the opportunity to reframe the narrative at various points in the agreement. For example, the document can conclude with a repeated recital that the agreement is not intended to promote divorce but rather is an effort to promote marital tranquility. Moreover, a drafter can reinforce the narrative by ordering the document such that provisions concerning estate rights (should the marriage terminate upon death) are placed before provisions concerning dissolution rights (should the marriage end in divorce).48

Another narrative technique to supplant the stock story uses formatting to engage the client-audience of the prenuptial agreement. Dense text with few divisions may be difficult for clients to absorb, decreasing their initial comprehension of the text and diminishing their continued use of the document. Divisions, descriptive headings, and other formatting can be used as signals to promote comprehension and retention of the agreement.49 A table of topics can also be used to itemize the topics addressed in the prenuptial agreement. An attorney can further customize an agreement by using proper names,50 rather than generic, defined terms, so as to reflect the personalization of the story.

Coupled with the use of independent counsel and full and adequate disclosure, client engagement in the negotiating and drafting of a prenuptial agreement can enhance its ultimate enforceability. Deliberately supplanting a stock story with a client’s individualized story fosters that kind of engagement.

48. MCGUANE & HOGAN, supra note 45, § 41:57.
49. Headings increase reader engagement with text and promote reader retention of the text. See, e.g., Kristin Ritchey, Jonathan Schuster & Jaryn Allen, How the Relationship Between Text and Headings Influences Readers’ Memory, 33 CONTEMP. EDUC. PSYCHOL. 859, 860 (2008) (studying use of typographical signals, such as bolding and underling, and organizational signals, such as headings, overviews, and summaries); see also Robert F. Lorch, Jr., Text-Signaling Devices and Their Effects on Reading and Memory Processes, 1 EDUC. PSYCHOL. REV. 209, 212 (1989) (exploring the impact of text signals on reading processes, comprehension, and memory).
B. Plot and Narrative Movement

Plot is a core characteristic of all narratives and refers to the sequencing of events in a story. Related to the concept of plot is narrative movement, which refers to the story’s forward momentum that results in a culmination that the sequence of events anticipates. Plot includes concepts of sequencing, pacing, and emphasis, such that “plot will be phased into a series of episodes of rising affective intensity, with the strongest discharge of energy at the end and the other main points spaced out in roughly ascending order through the text.” Although the word plot is singular, a narrative can certainly have multiple plotlines. Structuring a sequence of events with reference to these plotlines can strengthen the structure of a transactional document.

The ordering of events may initially seem like only a component of fictional narrative where the author has great freedom in the creation and selection of events. Yet plot has a role in the development of all narratives, including the narrative relayed by a transactional document such as a contract. Contracts are in essence the private law between the parties, and contract terms guide how the relationship between the parties will progress over time. The terms set forth the sequence of events that will take place during the contract term and provide for different contingencies, or alternative plotlines, that may occur during that time period. Contract terms thus enable the parties to understand how to perform their duties in accordance with the anticipated plot.

Terms may also protect one party if the other party to the contract breaches its obligations, representing a foreseeable alternative plotline. A

51. E.g., Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative 5 (1992) (observing that “without at least a minimal plot [the narrative] would be incomprehensible”)
52. Id. at xi; see also Gerald Prince, A Dictionary of Narratology 73 (rev. ed. 2003) (defining plot, in part, as a series “of events with an emphasis on causality”)
55. See, e.g., Kelley Griffith, Writing Essays about Literature 53 (2011)
56. As defined in the Restatement (Second) of Contracts, “[a] contract is a promise or a set of promises for the breach of which the law gives a remedy, or the performance of which the law in some way recognizes as a duty.” Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 1 (Am. Law Inst. 1981)
shift in the narrative movement may be presented in the body of the contract to acknowledge and guide the various foreseeable plotlines. For example, terms may set forth a sequence of events that leads to disputes between the parties. Additional terms may then be added to provide for what is to happen when those disputes arise—such as the circumstances under which a party may terminate the contract and the determination of where disputes may be litigated. By anticipating the various potential splits in the plot of the contract, the drafter can better create contract terms to deal effectively and efficiently with each contingency.

Presenting terms as components of a plot facilitates the cognitive process that gives meaning to the terms when viewed as parts of a whole.58 An employment agreement, for example, may be created and drafted with reference to plot.59 The nature of the employment agreement and the terms of the contract depend upon a variety of factors, including “the level of the employee, in terms of both responsibility and compensation; the importance of the employee to the organization; the type of company information that will be entrusted to the employee and that the employee is expected to develop; and the amount of training the employee will receive.”60 The employment agreement needs to set forth sufficient detail so that the plot may continue on the anticipated series of events—the parties’ performance of their respective duties during the employment term. This can be represented by terms setting forth job duties, salary increases, and bonuses.61

Terms of an employment agreement must also anticipate alternative plotlines. The drafter should include terms dealing with the bases and procedures for contract termination and the occurrence of force majeure.

61. See generally Vito A. Gagliardi Jr. & Thomas O. Johnston, Evaluating Key Clauses and Terms in Today’s Employment Agreements, in INSIDE THE MINDS: NEGOTIATING AND DRAFTING EMPLOYMENT AGREEMENTS (2012 ed.), 2012 WL 3058620 (“The goal in drafting an employment agreement is to memorialize effectively the value you expect from the employment relationship with language that protects the employer’s interests.”).
events.62 The employment agreement should also acknowledge the potential shift in plot narrative toward contract dispute63 by including boilerplate terms relating to forum selection, choice of law, and the provision of notice under the contract.64

For example, in describing contract performance, an employment agreement may typically provide as follows: “The Corporation hereby engages and employs Executive as the Chief Executive Officer.” By envisioning the sequence of events in a contract performance as a plot, however, the provision may be revised as follows:

The Corporation shall employ Executive as the Chief Executive Officer. Executive shall perform such duties as are commensurate with such a title, including but not limited to: reporting directly to the Board of Directors; directing, supervising, and having responsibility for all aspects of the operations and general affairs of the Corporation; and serving without additional compensation as an officer or director of any subsidiary of the Corporation upon request of the Board of Directors.

The provision remains accurate but presents greater detail as to the nature of the performance, thus enabling the parties to better understand how to perform their duties under the contract and follow the anticipated sequence of events.

In a similar manner, a provision relating to termination of the contract may provide as follows: “Executive shall have the right to terminate her

62. The force majeure clause in a contract excuses a party from not performing its contractual obligations due to unforeseen events beyond its reasonable control. If a contract does not include a force majeure clause, the default rule generally applied by courts is that “where . . . a party's performance is made impracticable without his fault by the occurrence of an event the non-occurrence of which was a basic assumption on which the contract was made, his duty to render that performance is discharged . . . .” Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 261 (Am. Law Inst. 1981).

63. See, e.g., Sandra Craig McKenzie, Storytelling: A Different Voice for Legal Education, 41 U. Kan. L. Rev. 251, 257 (1992) (“Part of the storytelling involved in drafting a contract, for example, looks ahead to the possibility that breach of the contract may result in litigation to enforce its terms.”).

employment under this Agreement for any reason.” Expanding this reference to a point in the plot could produce the following provision:

Executive may terminate her employment under this Agreement for any reason as long as Executive provides the Board of Directors with 30 days advance notice. If Executive terminates employment under this section, the Corporation has no obligation to provide Executive with any severance payment or other payments under this Agreement.

Unnecessary details are not cluttering the provision, but the consequences of the contemplated event are introduced, producing a more complete and cohesive narrative.

While the terms of a contract generally address the anticipated plot narrative of contract performance, unanticipated or alternative endings should also be introduced in the contract. Failing to consider an unanticipated ending may produce an agreement that fails to include, for example, a force majeure clause. During the term of the employment contract, an employer corporation may be unable to continue its operations; but, without the inclusion of a force majeure clause, the parties must seek the intervention of the court to apply the default common-law rules.65 Instead, the agreement could clarify as follows:

Neither party will be responsible for any failure to fulfill its obligations due to causes beyond its reasonable control, including but not limited to: acts of God; acts or omissions of any government or military authority, including any order determining the operations of Corporation are not permitted under the laws of the jurisdictions in which it operates; death or disability of the Executive; and bankruptcy or insolvency of Corporation. In the event this clause becomes effective, the party whose performance is not excused may either suspend the contract for up to 30 days or terminate the contract.

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In a similar manner, a trust agreement may be structured with reference to plot.66 For example, an individual may wish to create a trust to be used for the education of his or her descendants.67 The trust provisions should consider the most likely use of the trust property (education), an alternate situation in which the descendants have no need for educational support but require other support, and the possibility of the settlor leaving no descendants.68

The conscious recognition of plot helps “shape” and provides “direction” to the narrative.69 Envisioning the structure of events as plotting a narrative enables the drafter to foster the full development of a transactional document that effectuates the parties’ intent and better addresses any foreseeable contingencies.

C. Character

Character, sometimes considered the most important aspect of a narrative,70 consists of the people, entities, and ideas that participate in the narrative. In legal storytelling, the emphasis is on characters as a means to a particular plot outcome.71 These characters and their motivations drive the plot forward through their actions and inactions.

In the context of a contract, the contracting parties are the characters. Conceptualizing the parties as characters can result in contracts that better encapsulate the parties’ understandings. For instance, lawyers can draft contracts that better effectuate the parties’ intent by providing descriptive information about the parties in the Recitals or Background section of the


69. Brooks, Reading for Plot, supra note 51, at xi.


contract. This descriptive information may include specific references to the identity of the parties and may also address the intent or motive of the parties, transforming two-dimensional references to the parties into three-dimensional, human characters.

Inclusion of the parties’ intent or motivation may facilitate the execution of the contract between the parties and, even more importantly, may later assist a court if called upon to interpret the contract in the event of a dispute. The use of character as an aid to contract interpretation is twofold:

1. If a court is required to interpret potentially ambiguous language in a contract, its primary goal is to effectuate the parties’ intent. The inclusion of descriptive information about the parties and their intent within the contract itself is both more effective and more likely to achieve that goal.

2. If a court is asked to enforce contract terms that it often views suspiciously, such as a jury-waiver clause or a covenant not to compete, a description of the parties’ intent may go a long way in helping the court decide whether these particular parties are entitled to have such a term enforced under the circumstances of their particular transaction.

For example, the following form provision (as may appear in a collective bargaining agreement) provides a description of the parties’ intent:

It is the intent of the parties to secure and sustain maximum productivity per employee. In return to employer for the rates provided in this agreement and consistent with the principle of a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay, union emphasizes its agreement with the objectives of achieving the highest level of employee performance and efficiency, and agrees that union, its agents, and its members will not take, authorize, or condone any action that interferes with the attainment of such objective.72

Inclusion of this description may make it more likely that the parties will be willing to finalize the transaction and also serves to assist a court in defining the contractual obligations of the parties to the contract in a way that best encapsulates the parties’ intent.

In the context of a settlement agreement, recitals may be used to showcase the concept of characters. Specifically, recitals can be used to

describe the parties and their relationship, such as the nature of their dispute and their disclaimer of liability or fault. As the parties are generally introduced in the recitals, the actual party names can also be used, rather than generic characterizations like “buyer” and “seller,” to reinforce the individualized, personalized nature of the transactional document. In addition, the recitals can set forth the parties’ specific concerns under the contract, such as a preference towards the creation of an accord and satisfaction rather than a substituted contract. Including this information about intent will give dimension to what otherwise might simply be empty words on a page.

Furthermore, character can be used to boost the chances a court will enforce a contract term that it would otherwise view suspiciously. The following is an example of such a term—a standard jury-waiver provision:

Due to high cost and time involved in commercial litigation before a jury, the parties waive all right to a jury trial on all issues in any action or proceeding relating to this lease agreement, the transaction contemplated by this lease agreement, or any documents executed in connection with the contemplated transaction.

Although this provision covers the basic requirements, the bland provision may not ultimately be enforced. Courts are typically reluctant to enforce terms where a party waives its fundamental legal rights, such as the right to

73. See Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms, supra note 27, at 238.
74. In a substituted contract, the releasing party discharges the other party’s obligation and the original contract; thus if there is a breach, the releasing party’s only recourse is to bring an action under the substituted contract. In contrast, under an accord and satisfaction, only performance of the obligations under the accord discharges the original contract. In the event of a breach, the releasing party may choose to bring an action under the accord or based on the initial obligations under the original contract. See Samuel Williston & Richard A. Lord, A Treatise on the Law of Contracts § 73:36 (4th ed. 2003).
a trial by jury, unless the provision reflects that the parties intentionally and knowingly gave up their rights to a jury trial. Customizing the provision by using the narrative technique of character can strengthen the enforceability of the provision. For example, the revised provision in a commercial lease may read as follows:

**Waiver of Jury Trial by Theresa Taylor and Logan Lucas.**

Theresa Taylor makes a voluntary, intentional, and knowing waiver of a right to a trial by jury. Theresa Taylor acknowledges that neither Logan Lucas nor any agent acting on Logan Lucas’s behalf has induced her waiver. Theresa Taylor has had the opportunity to consult with independent legal counsel about this provision. Theresa Taylor understands the costs and time involved in litigation. As a consequence, upon advice and reflection, Theresa Taylor confirms her intent to waive her right to a jury trial and has placed her initials in the space indicated below this provision to acknowledge her intent.

This provision projects a personalized contemplation of the significance of the provision and reinforces the intentional and knowing waiver by the tenant.

Viewing parties to the transaction as characters with individual traits and specific intentions allows the drafter to more fully develop pertinent aspects of the document. This may ultimately be critical in the execution, interpretation, and implementation of the document.

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D. Point of View

Related to character is the concept of point of view.80 Point of view refers to the perspective from which the audience experiences the narrative.81 The general categories of point of view are omniscient, first person, and third person.82 Point of view, however, is more than the consistent use of pronouns. Selecting a point of view and its consistent use throughout a narrative is crucial in influencing the audience’s perception and memory of the narrative.83

The last will and testament84 presents an opportunity to examine point of view in the context of transactional drafting. From the introduction to the closing, a will begins and ends with first person “I.” A will is a legal document that reflects an assessment of accomplishments, an acknowledgment of disappointments, a confrontation of mortality, and a contemplation of legacy. In essence, the will is a first person narrative.85 The use of self-referencing—that is, I, me, my, and mine—can strengthen the power and resonance of the personal narrative in a will.

Establishing the point of view is more, however, than using the first person pronoun. For example, a standard provision in a will reads, “To my niece Evelyn Marie Stein, if she survives me, my art deco diamond and sapphire brooch.” The provision can be modified to include the first person

“I.” But the point of view can be developed by expanding the testator’s descriptions about the property to show the significance the testator placed on the property, such as in the following example:

I give to my niece Evelyn Marie Stein, if she survives me, the art deco diamond and sapphire brooch I received as a twentieth wedding anniversary gift.

Point of view may reference the perspective from which the narrator relays the narrative even more directly by sharing the reasoning behind decision.86 In the context of a will, point of view thus also includes the testator’s directions, wishes, and hopes with regard to the dispositive and administrative terms. These explanations may share the significance behind a piece of tangible personal property, which are not necessary for the identification of the property. The explanation may share the rationale for an unequal distribution of property. This type of language to share point of view is commonly referred to as “expressive language.” Consider the following example:

I give to my son Albert Chin, if he survives me, the pair of 11 inch Tiffany & Co. crystal candlesticks that were regularly used on the Thanksgiving Day table.

This entry now provides the beneficiary with greater insight about the testamentary gift. On the other hand, drafters may be concerned that expanded descriptions inject ambiguity. What, for example, if another pair of candlesticks was used on some of the Thanksgiving Day tables? Drafters may also fear that adding to the description will reveal the testator’s faulty recollection, inviting claims of lack of capacity if, in the brooch hypothetical, the brooch was actually received as a gift on the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, not the twentieth. These legitimate concerns are not limited to expressive language however; they apply to all testamentary language. All provisions in a will may be potentially ambiguous. For instance, the diamond brooch may turn out to be made of paste stones and the candlesticks may not bear the mark of Tiffany & Co. No drafter would suggest the elimination of all descriptive language. Refusal to consider the value of the enhanced description is a lack of acknowledgment about the importance of point of view.

86. See, e.g., LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF POETIC TERMS, supra note 27, at 238.
Drafters may also object to the inclusion of non-legal language in a legal document. This objection may be because drafters are worried that testators will include vitriolic insults that will goad beneficiaries to institute legal proceedings or bog down the estate’s administration with ambiguity. The testator’s point of view may thus cause adverse legal consequences. Nonetheless, expressive language has a role in establishing the testator’s point of view, benefitting both the testator and subsequent audiences of the will. A will is, after all, a document of historic origins, written in the present tense, and intended to be implemented in the future. The point of view in the will should reflect not only the history of the document itself but also the history of the individual testator. The use of self-referencing, descriptive headings, sequencing of provisions, and description of property enhances the personal narrative of the will by sharing the testator’s point of view.

Sharing the point of view facilitates the drafting and the implementation of the terms of the will, especially when the court is called upon to interpret the will. In addressing the formalities of execution, Professor John H. Langbein wrote, “Standardization of wills is a matter of unusual importance, because unlike contracts or conveyances, wills inevitably contemplate judicial implementation.” This reasoning has been applied in the context of drafting to urge the adoption of uniform constructions and language choices and discourage drafting innovation, such as the use of narrative techniques. But innovation does not mean a disregard or ignorance of the canons of construction and the possibility of judicial interpretation. By incorporating point of view, the court is able to draw from the individualized language to better interpret the testator’s intent and

87. This language is typically referred to as “non-legal language” because the language is not substantively required. The reluctance to include expressive language may also be the interpretation of expressive language as “feminine language” that does not belong in the “masculine language” of legal documents. See Karen J. Sneddon, Not Your Mother’s Will: Gender, Language, and Wills, 98 MARQ. L. REV. 1535, 1561-68 (2015).

88. In a similar manner, a revocable trust (the pure will substitute) may benefit from enhanced attention to point of view. Trust agreements are typically written in third person. Incorporating first person pronouns to identify the settlor reinforces that the key point of view is that of the settlor. See, e.g., Kevin D. Millard, Drafting Wills, Trusts, and Other Estate Planning Documents: A Style Manual §§ 2.6, 6.3 (2006) (urging drafters to use first person in the pure will substitute: the revocable trusts). For an exploration of Wills and Revocable Trusts, see Alan Newman, Revocable Trusts and the Law of Wills: An Imperfect Fit, 43 REAL PROP. TR. & EST. L.J. 523 (2008).

therefore better implement the terms of the will. Innovation, particularly through the use of narrative techniques such as point of view, can produce documents that acknowledge the function of the document.

E. Setting and Narrative Time

The setting is the environment in which a story or event takes place. It can include specific information about time and place or simply be descriptive. Geographical location, historical era, social conditions, weather, immediate surroundings, and time of day can all be aspects of setting.

Relatedly, narrative time refers to the temporal sequence of events in a story. It addresses the cultural, historical, and chronological factors surrounding the events of a narrative. In other words, narrative time is the temporal setting, helping to set the stage and context for the plot events and the ideology of both the characters and the author.

The use of setting, both in terms of environment and temporal sequence, can help ground a contract in its particular location and time of performance. Where and when the parties are obligated to perform can have great importance to the overall plot or purpose of the contract. While detailed descriptions of geographical location and historical settings may seem more suited to fictional narratives that evoke a sense of imagery in the mind of the reader, location and historical perspective also enable the contract drafter to better achieve the parties’ intent. For example, an employment agreement that sets forth the requirement that an employee travel frequently may avoid future disputes or dissatisfaction with the parties’ contractual relationship. Likewise, a force majeure clause in a sales agreement may take on greater meaning and perspective if it referenced the military coup or acts of civil disobedience that had recently affected the ability of local companies to manufacture or export goods. The inclusion of a specifically tailored force majeure clause represents a type of “flash

92. See, e.g., Berger, supra note 5, at 4 (remarking that “narratives take place within or over, to be more precise, some kind of time period.”); see also Paul Ricoeur, Narrative Time, in Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames 35, 35-45 (Brian Richardson ed., 2002).
forward,” or prolepsis,93 and is an effective technique for transactional drafters.

In its most obvious expression, the use of setting in a contract addresses which jurisdiction and what body of law will be applicable in determining its enforceability and interpretation in the event of a dispute.94 Many drafting scholars suggest that forum-selection and choice-of-law provisions are the most important terms in any contract.95 However, many form contracts include a generic arbitration clause like the following:

All actions, disputes, claims and controversies relating to this Agreement, or the breach, invalidity or termination hereof, will be subject to and resolved by binding arbitration pursuant to the Commercial Arbitration Rules of U.S. Arbitration and Mediation. Any award or order rendered by the arbitrator may be confirmed as a judgment or order in any state or federal court of competent jurisdiction.

A more nuanced use of setting, however, would result in the drafting of a more effective arbitration clause—one that includes reference to issues such as the number and selection process of arbitrators and the timing and location of the proceedings.96

Understanding the temporal setting or sequence of events is also vital to contract drafters for several reasons. Specifically, it allows them to differentiate between terms that are in effect throughout the life of the contract (i.e., the definitions), terms that relate solely to a current state of affairs (i.e., representations of fact), and terms that may or will become

93. One type of narrative time is prolepsis. While prolepsis is often presented in literature as a flash forward, it can more broadly be considered the evocation of events that will occur after the present moment. LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF POETIC TERMS, supra note 27, at 243.


effective in the future (i.e., the parties’ mandatory duties, conditional duties, and warranties or promises as to the state of facts to exist at some time in the future).97

A contract for the sale of goods98 presents an example of how drafters can incorporate concepts of setting and narrative time to benefit the implementation and interpretation of the transaction. One type of provision that setting affects is the definition. Contract definitions are continually speaking, meaning they are effective over the entire course of the contractual relationship—from execution through performance, to breach of contract, termination, and possibly beyond. Therefore, drafters should draft contract definitions in the present tense to ensure that readers comprehend their applicability in all temporal settings, present and future. For example, a typical contract definition should be phrased as follows: “Premises means the property located at 1202 West Elm Street.”

A drafter’s choice in creating mandatory duties versus conditional duties99 also references concepts of place and time. A conditional duty is not immediately activated and does not become an obligation of the party, thus subjecting that party to breach and damages, unless and until an event occurs in some future time or place. Likewise, constructive duties of exchange, those terms that establish which party to a contract is obligated to perform first, reference concepts of place and time. For example, a simple contract for the sale of an automobile may state the seller’s obligation to deliver the vehicle to the buyer and the buyer’s obligation to pay a sum of money but not set forth what happens if the seller does not deliver the vehicle on time. Is the buyer still obligated to pay, forcing her to sue the seller for breach to recoup any monetary damages suffered? One can see the implications of failing to address the timing of the parties’ contract duties in even more complicated transactions, such as the sale of goods by a manufacturer to a wholesaler or the sale of a family business to a new owner. By incorporating the concepts of narrative time and recognizing the

97. See, e.g., SUSAN L. BRODY ET AL., LEGAL DRAFTING 20 (1994) (stating that the anticipation of future contingencies is critical for effective drafting); RICHARD K. NEUMANN, JR., TRANSACTIONAL LAWYERING SKILLS: CLIENT INTERVIEWING, COUNSELING, AND NEGOTIATION 2-3 (2013) (acknowledging that transactions have both deal and, potentially dispute, stages, which should inform the drafting process).


99. Conditional duties may reference the time in which the party is legally obligated and identify when the party is subject to breach. See Arthur L. Corbin, Conditions in the Law of Contract, 28 YALE L.J. 739, 763-65 (1919).
importance of the sequencing of events in a contract, the drafter can ameliorate these concerns and better effectuate the parties’ intent.

Anchoring a transactional document to a setting and infusing it with a sense of narrative time helps ground the transaction in a realistic sequence of events. Drafters can use these narrative concepts of environment and temporal setting to better facilitate the execution and implementation of the transaction and to help avoid potential disputes between the parties as to when and how they are obligated to perform under the contract.

F. Themes and Motifs

A theme is the underlying principle or central meaning of a narrative.¹⁰⁰ A motif is a recurring phrase, idea, image, or sound that develops or explains a theme.¹⁰¹ Themes and motifs help convey the ultimate meaning of the text. Using themes and motifs in transactional documents can provide guidance to the parties who must work with the documents.

For example, in transactional drafting, both private foundations and charitable trusts¹⁰² would benefit from deliberate incorporation of themes and motifs. From the name inscribed on a building to a scholarship bearing a name, legacies are often created and perpetuated through charitable¹⁰³


¹⁰¹. LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF POETIC TERMS, supra note 27, at 198 (defining motif as “a theme, device, event, or character that is developed through nuance and repetition”). For a selection of literary themes and motifs from adolescence to werewolves, see 1 DICTIONARY OF LITERARY THEMES AND MOTIFS (Jean-Charles Seigneuret ed., 1988).


¹⁰³. Originally developed by the Romans, charitable trusts flourished under the guiding hand of the ecclesiastical court. See generally ROBERT H. BREHNER, GIVING: CHARITY AND PHILANTHROPY IN HISTORY 6-8, 30 (1996).
Individual and family giving in America is estimated at more than $22 billion each year. Donors, whether individuals or families, use charitable gift agreements, private foundations, or charitable trusts as charitable giving mechanisms. Embedding a theme that is developed through motifs may assist in implementing, enforcing, and, as needed, modifying a trust to realize the donor’s goals while still providing flexibility to respond to the current circumstances and situation.

Charitable trust agreements must include a declaration of charitable purposes and goals. As provided in the Uniform Trust Code, charitable purposes include “the relief of poverty, the advancement of education or religion, the promotion of health, governmental or municipal purposes, or other achievements beneficial to the community.” Form books typically include the broadest, most generic statements of charitable purposes. The following are examples:

The purposes of this Trust are to devote and apply the property of this instrument vested in the Trustees and the income to be derived exclusively for charitable, religious, scientific, literary, or educational purposes, either directly or by contributions to organizations duly authorized to carry on charitable, religious, scientific, literary, or educational activities.

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105. Russell N. James III, Health, Wealth, and Charitable Estate Planning: A Longitudinal Examination of Testamentary Charitable Giving Plans, 38 Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Q. 1026, 1027 (2009) (noting that this figure is more than double the amount given by businesses and corporations).


This Trust is created exclusively for charitable, religious, literary and educational purposes, including for such purposes, the making of distributions to organizations that qualify as exempt organizations under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. 110

Drafters can, and should, tailor the focus to reflect the donor’s intent by using themes and motifs. 111 The settlor’s interests, family traditions, and wishes influence charitable giving and should be reflected in the statement of charitable purpose. 112 For example, the charitable purpose of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, one of the wealthiest private foundations, 113 provides that the trustees are,

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people’s health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with


the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need
to succeed in school and life.114

This language is repeated in all of the documents relating to the trust to present a unified vision of the trust’s focus and work.

A statement of purpose customized to the settlor aids the intended implementation and interpretation of the terms of a charitable trust because the interpretation of its terms must be made consistent with the settlor’s intent.115 As one commentary noted, “History suggests that trustees and foundation leaders operating with a free hand tend to perform less effectively than those constrained by some donor choices.”116

The potential duration of trusts requires the drafter to also incorporate possible future contingencies and situations. For instance, because the Rule Against Perpetuities does not apply to charitable trusts, charitable trusts have potentially unlimited duration.117 Therefore, the need to reassess the trust’s ability to achieve the settlor’s goals may occur decades after the settlor’s death.118 Resources may expand exponentially or shrink considerably. In these situations, modifications of trust terms may make administration more efficient and effective, and trustees may need to consider alternative goals.

Investment strategies may also be reexamined. Consider the recent commitment of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, descendants of the Standard

115. See, e.g., IND. CODE ANN. § 30-4-1-3(West 2015).
116. FLEISHMAN, supra note 113, at 294 (illustrating this point with a consideration of the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation).
Oil magnate, to “divest from investments in fossil fuels.”119 This divestment is consistent with the mission statement of the fund to “advance[] social change that contributes to a more just, substantial, and peaceful world”120—even if at first glance this decision seems to be inconsistent with the connection to Standard Oil.121 A statement of purpose that has been customized to reflect the donor’s intent facilitated this reassessment.122

Once the trust’s theme is established, the drafter can embed and repeat key phrases from its statement of purpose throughout the governing documents. This also holds true for governing documents beyond a trust agreement. In addition, key phrases can be repeated in related, ancillary documents such as annual reports, letters of wishes, and letters to donors. Even the attachments to the Form 990-PF, the required tax return for private foundations, may reference the theme.123 These repeated words and phrases become reoccurring motifs that guide interpretation and implementation of the trust to fulfill the donor’s vision for his or her charitable giving.

Ethical wills, also called legacy letters,124 likewise allow for the embedding of themes and the repeating of key motifs. Phrases that are included in the will may be repeated in the ethical will to buttress the intent of the documents as a whole.

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122. See Susan N. Gary, The Problems with Donor Intent: Interpretation, Enforcement, and Doing the Right Thing, 85 CHI.-KENT L. REV. 977 (2010); see also FLEISHMAN, supra note 113, at 304 (urging donors to “[s]pecifically describe your motivating intentions, list the objectives to be served, and explicitly proscribe all other objectives”).


A person or entity executes transactional documents, especially those surrounding charitable gifts, to further particular goals and intentions. These intentions bind subsequent interpretation and implementation of these documents. Establishing a theme within the governing documents can memorialize those intentions to guide subsequent trustees and the courts. Once a theme is established, repeatedly embedding motifs from the theme can contribute to its resonance.

V. Conclusion

Narrative techniques and transactional drafting may initially seem incompatible. Rather than injecting uncertainty or bloating a document with unnecessary information, narrative techniques can spur innovation while remaining grounded within the principles of good drafting. This article has aimed to showcase how narrative techniques can be used to develop, produce, and create transactional documents that meet and further the client’s immediate and future goals.

More than mere words on the page, transactional documents encapsulate concerns, hopes, fears, and wishes. In short, they are stories. A small business wants to hire a new Vice President of Operations. A company wishes to sell its eco-friendly products to consumers. An individual wants to pass on a treasured family heirloom. Because each of these events form a narrative memorialized in transactional documents, effective drafting of these documents will draw upon narrative techniques to facilitate conceptualization, construction, and ultimately implementation of the transaction.