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Structural and Discourse Features Of Narrative Writings by Grade Four and Six African American Students

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### **Abstract**

This study employed a theoretically grounded, 170 item protocol to assess the mechanical, syntactic, semantic, structural, discourse, and sociocultural features of written narrative. In-depth analysis of 104 narrative writing samples produced by African American fourth and sixth graders who attended low-performing schools revealed clusters of significant ( $p \leq .05$ ) variables. Structural and discourse features of the students' writings were the most prevalent and significant variables. The significant relationships among variables suggest a representational core of the salient structural and discourse features of the students' writings. Findings contribute to the available literature on analysis of written narrative by African American students and explicate theoretically grounded principles for the analysis of narrative writing.

The purpose of this study is to analyze 104 samples of written narrative by grade four and six African American students to ascertain how these writers used a variety of mechanical, syntactic, semantic, structural, discourse, and sociocultural features of written narrative. This investigation is a subset of a larger study of the language and literacy development and school achievement of 263 African American students whose state mandated test scores placed a majority of them at academic risk (Gordon Pershey, 2003; 2008; 2010 [forthcoming]). With the establishment of more developmental information on written narrative, we may arrive at decisions on how to scaffold and support young writers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Researchers have proposed numerous measures of written narrative assessment (Applebee, 1978; Bamberg, 1997; Hewitt & Duchan, 1995; Hughes, McGillivray, & Schmidek, 1997; Langer, 1985; Nelson & Van Meter, 2007; Stein & Glenn, 1979). Developmental norms for narration have been proposed but are not fully established (Astonington, 1990; Fey, Catts, & Proctor-Williams, 2001; Johnson, 1995; McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Naremore, 1997; Reilly, 1992; Scott, 1988). Available norms tend to pertain to sentence construction or reveal the use of only a limited number of narrative conventions (e.g., dialogue) and do not address an array of structural and discourse features.

Little information exists on the construction of written narrative by African American students. Prior studies have considered oral narration (Champion, 2003; Mainess, Champion, & McCabe, 2002) but there is a lack of research on written narratives.

### **Methodology**

Review of several theoretical and practical systems of analysis led to the construction of a narrative writing analysis protocol. A brief portion of the 15-page, 170 variable instrument appears below. The instrument assesses both structure and discourse by tabulating the mechanical, syntactic, semantic, structural, discourse, and sociocultural features used in samples of written language. This excerpt pertains to structural and discourse features utilized in written narrative.

#### **Excerpt from Narrative Writing Analysis Protocol**

Narrative Devices:

\_\_\_\_\_ Formulaic expressions

\_\_\_\_\_ Genre markers or frames

\_\_\_\_\_ Dialogue

Tells what character thinks \_\_\_\_\_

Rhapsodic features:

\_\_\_\_\_ clichés, figures of speech, sayings, lyrics, etc.

\_\_\_\_\_ repetitive refrains

\_\_\_\_\_ shared situational knowledge

\_\_\_\_\_ advice for the reader

\_\_\_\_\_ oral signaling devices

\_\_\_\_\_ clarifications

\_\_\_\_\_ author talks with character

\_\_\_\_\_ author has emotions for the character

Mathetic text features:

\_\_\_\_\_ constructs a reality/scenario

\_\_\_\_\_ relates introductory info

\_\_\_\_\_ problem posed/solved in this scenario

\_\_\_\_\_ Diary tone: recounts conversations

\_\_\_\_\_ # of Episodes

Categories of cohesive markers

\_\_\_\_\_ personal reference

\_\_\_\_\_ demonstrative reference

\_\_\_\_\_ comparative reference

\_\_\_\_\_ additive

\_\_\_\_\_ adversative

\_\_\_\_\_ causal

\_\_\_\_\_ temporal

\_\_\_\_\_ continuative

\_\_\_\_\_ repetition

\_\_\_\_\_ synonymy

\_\_\_\_\_ antonymy

\_\_\_\_\_ part-whole

\_\_\_\_\_ subordinate-superordinate

\_\_\_\_\_ nominal substitution

\_\_\_\_\_ verbal substitution

\_\_\_\_\_ clausal substitution

Rhetorical Predicates (Local Coherence) (Co-referents)

\_\_\_\_\_ Connective statements (and then; adverbials, e.g., later, temporal terms)

\_\_\_\_\_ Intersentential

\_\_\_\_\_ Within sentences

\_\_\_\_\_ Causal statements

\_\_\_\_\_ Comparative statements

\_\_\_\_\_ Problem pattern:

\_\_\_\_\_ Reasonable problem

\_\_\_\_\_ Ambiguous Problem

\_\_\_\_\_ Solution pattern

\_\_\_\_\_ Explanatory statements

\_\_\_\_\_ Alternative structure: Comparison and contrast

\_\_\_\_\_ Instigation, escalation, capping

\_\_\_\_\_ Little story within a big story

\_\_\_\_\_ Use of subtopic (related, coherent change)

\_\_\_\_\_ Mentions abstractions

\_\_\_\_\_ Sequence of events

\_\_\_\_\_ Additive (and then, and then)

\_\_\_\_\_ Causal

- \_\_\_\_\_ Temporal
- \_\_\_\_\_ Adversative
- \_\_\_\_\_ Continuative
- \_\_\_\_\_ Parallel action
- \_\_\_\_\_ Use of evidence
- \_\_\_\_\_ Mentions character's feelings, ideas, attitudes, thoughts

The samples are page-long handwritten narratives gathered from students' practice tests taken in preparation for the state-mandated writing assessment. One scoring protocol was completed per sample by a first rater, then the sample was rescored by a second rater. There were several first raters but only one second rater, who rated for consistency. A database of the frequency of occurrence of each variable was established.

## Results

A total of 104 samples of student writing were analyzed. The sample population was 55% male and 45% female. A database of the frequency of occurrence of each of the 170 variables was established. Examples of frequency tabulations are given in Figures 1 - 4.

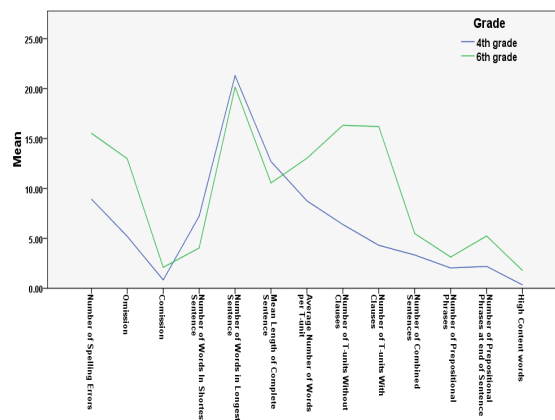


Figure 1. Mechanical, Syntactic, and Semantic Variables

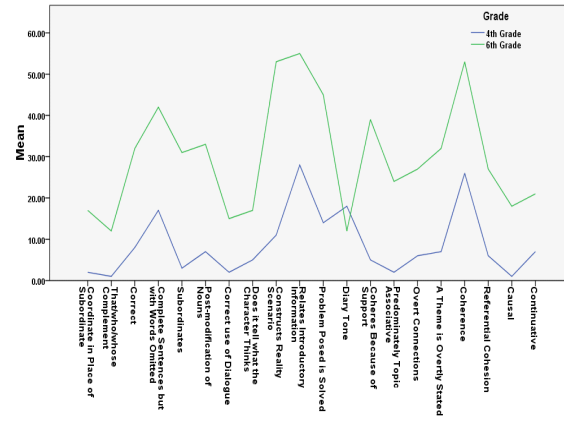


Figure 2. Structural and Discourse Variables

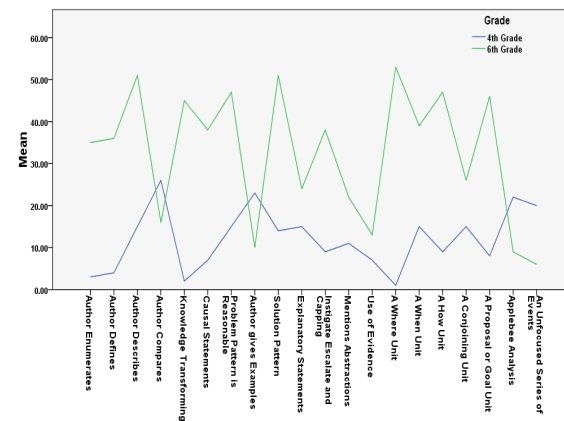


Figure 3. Structural and Discourse Variables

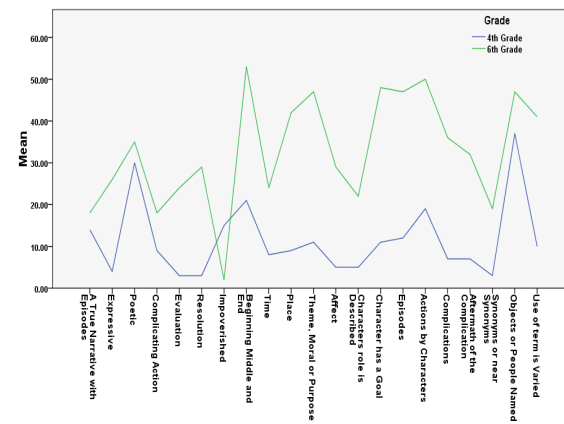


Figure 4. Structural and Discourse Variables

Frequency tabulations indicate that both 4th and 6th grade students' narratives included the use of introductory information, coherence, description, reasonable problem patterns, a proposal or goal unit, and a beginning, middle, and end to the narration. A modest increase among 6th graders occurred for the use of overt connections, causal patterns, explanatory statements, mention of abstractions, mentioning time, describing a character's role, and actions by characters.

Next, within grade testing was conducted. Cross-tabulation of all variables revealed the strength of association between variables and yielded chi square values for each pair of variables; 62 variables remained significantly correlated at  $p \leq .05$ .

Next, log linear analyses identified the most parsimonious and strongest interactions between the 62 variables. 58 variables continued to interact with other variables. There remained 31 significant ( $p \leq .05$ ) interactions. This included 11 3-variable groups (a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  way interaction) and 20 4-variable groups (a  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$  way interaction). These models vary as to goodness of fit but all are significant and offer potential interpretations.

Table 1 shows 3- and 4-variable groups that are significant at  $p \leq .05$ . There are a few other groups not shown, as they are highly similar in constituent features to the groups shown.

Chi sq 12.132 $p \leq .000$ Instigate, escalate, cap Place Use of terms is varied (semantics) Coordinate subject (syntax)	Chi sq 7.916 $p = .005$ Character has a goal Actions by character Objects or people named Author describes
Chi sq 10.237 $p = .001$ Explanatory statements A where unit A how unit Relates intro info	Chi sq 7.319 $p = .007$ Complications Affect Character has a goal Expressivity
Chi sq 9.554 $p = .002$ Coherence Coheres because of support Predominantly topic associative	Chi sq 7.285 $p = .007$ Relates intro info A where unit Theme, moral, purpose Reasonable problem pattern
Chi sq 9.390 $p = .002$ Instigate, escalate, cap Overt connections Place Character has a goal	Chi sq 7.069 $p = .008$ That/who/whose complement (syntax) Use of evidence Author gives examples



Chi sq 8.692 p=.003 Objects or people named Actions by characters Theme, moral, purpose	Chi sq 5.370 p=.020 Mentions abstractions Knowledge transforming Resolution
Chi sq 8.611 p=.003 Instigate, escalate, cap Place Coheres because of support	Chi sq 4.204 p=.040 Correct use of dialogue Tells what character thinks Constructs reality

Table 1. 3- and 4- variable groups that are significant at  $p \leq .05$

It is important to explore the types of variables that contribute to the statistically significant core of variables used. Fifty (86%) of the 58 core variables represent narrative and discourse features. In contrast, syntactic variables account for 10% and semantic variables account for 4% of the 58 variables that interact consistently and significantly with other variables. All mechanical features, semantic elements, and syntactic forms listed on the 170 item protocol interacted less frequently than discourse elements interacted. The only sociocultural feature that interacted was the use of topic associative narration.

These findings suggest that discourse features co-occur and complement one another. Not only is a student using some discourse elements – the student writer is likely to use multiple discourse elements within a composition.

## Discussion

### Coherence: Cohesion within Text

Of the 58 variables that withstood the tests of significance, several pertain to how a writer builds coherence within a text. Coherence refers to how a writer creates a text where elements build upon one another and form a reasonable sequence of events or a series of ideas. The writers employed the following text coherence strategies:

- Instigate, escalate, cap (an action sequence)
- Coherence because of support (an idea is presented, followed by supporting ideas)
- Explanatory statements
- Use of evidence
- Use of examples
- Reasonable problem pattern
- Resolution

Relatedly, text organization features, including introductory information, naming objects or people, and dialogue, were evidenced. Use of the topic associative pattern of

narration did not detract from coherence, in fact, this pattern was highly correlated with coherence.

### **Story Grammar**

Several of the core variables pertain to the use of conventional story grammar elements, such as character, setting, and plot. Characters had goals and actions and the writers told what their characters think. Settings were described by place or by the use of a “where” unit. Construction of a reality was also a device for creating setting. Plots progressed by virtue of complications, a “how” unit, problems and resolutions, and via the pattern of instigation, escalation, and capping of events.

### **Inside the Mind of the Writer**

Some variables revealed characteristics of the writer. Variables termed “affect” and “expressivity” showed that writers imparted feeling, thought, emotion, and meaningfulness. Also noted were abstractions, themes, morals, and purposes. Writers did not just present knowledge – their narratives showed they somehow transformed knowledge (e.g., made an interpretation, drew a conclusion, or offered a differing view). The writers used description and varied terms.

### **Conclusions**

Statistical analysis reveals clusters of the most salient features of the students’ writings. It appears that the mechanical, semantic, syntactic, and sociocultural features supported the writers’ use of structural and discourse features. The structural and discourse features used by the students are evidenced for the two grade levels and for the total sample, and the interrelationship of the features used has been explored.

### **Significance**

Findings of this study may yield practical significance by documenting developmental capabilities that would suggest educational and remedial targets for similar students. This report may yield theoretical significance in that it may add to the information available on students’ development of narrative writing skills.

### **Future Research**

In an additional upcoming aspect of this study, use of these salient features will be compared to the students’ test scores on nine individually administered achievement tests in the areas of written language, reading comprehension, and oral vocabulary (Gordon Pershey, 2003; 2008). Any additional relationships could potentially detail how writing proficiency related to scores on achievement testing.

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