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The essay with a thousand faces: Academic writing and heroic narrative

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This paper describes structural similarities between the academic essay and the heroic narrative. It presents a simple model of the heroic narrative, based on an analysis originating in the work of Campbell (1968), and it then traces correspondences between the structure of the heroic narrative and the structure of the academic essay as it is generally understood and taught in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes, and in Academic Language and Learning (ALL) contexts more generally. The article suggests that a good essay could be one that meets a reader's narrative expectations and that the 'heroic journey' could provide a fruitful metaphor to consider the nature and function of essays.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes; EAP; academic essay-writing; essay structure; heroic narrative; hero's journey.

1. Introduction

For those of us who teach essay-writing to students in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts, and Academic Language and Learning (ALL) contexts more generally, our approach to this task tends to be based on the observation that academic essays have a set of common features: they have a tripartite structure involving an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion; they present arguments; they include critical accounts of published literature, and so on. We teach students to identify these features and construct meaning from them, and to reproduce and manipulate them in their own essay-writing. This paper addresses the question of why academic essays are structured in this particular way, rather than in some other way, and why they have the specific set of common features that they have.

In this paper, I propose what I believe to be a relatively novel answer to this question. I suggest that the contemporary academic essay has the form it has because it corresponds to a narrative structure, which had already existed for millennia before the academic essay first came along. The first section of the paper introduces the structure of the 'heroic narrative' and discusses the connections made in the literature to date between heroic narratives and academic writing (e.g., Moore, 2013; Houslay, 2016), the second section presents the structure of the heroic narrative in greater detail, and the third section presents the correspondences between the heroic narrative and the academic essay.

2. The heroic narrative and the essay-writing process

The heroic narrative (or 'hero's journey') is essentially the story of a hero or heroine who leaves home, faces obstacles and enemies, achieves a victory, and returns home. This is possibly the oldest type of story in the world; the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, dating back to the second

millennium BC and often cited as the oldest written story in the world (Dalley, 2000), is a heroic narrative, and it seems likely that heroic narratives were repeated in oral traditions long before this date.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968), Joseph Campbell suggests (on the evidence of numerous traditional stories from around the world) that the heroic narrative is made up of 17 distinct stages and that in a fully developed heroic narrative we can generally expect to see most or all of these 17 stages in a predicable sequence (Campbell, 1968). Campbell's structural analysis of heroic narratives found no favour in the academic world[1], but it has been taken up enthusiastically by scriptwriters as a useful way to think about the construction of effective and emotionally satisfying stories. George Lucas famously made use of Campbell's ideas to construct the heroic narrative of Star Wars (Kurtz & Lucas, 1977); Christopher Vogler, one of the writers of *The Lion King*, presents a 12-stage model of the heroic narrative in his book, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (Vogler, 2007), and comedy writer Dan Harmon (of *Community* and *Rick and Morty* fame) has written extensively online in terms of an eight-stage model (Harmon, undated).

I propose for the purposes of this paper to condense the structure of the heroic narrative even further, into a six-stage model (Table 1). Like all models of the heroic narrative from Campbell onwards, this model is divided into three 'acts' or 'movements': departure, initiation and return.

Table 1. A six-stage model of the heroic narrative.

Departure	1. Ordinary world
	2. Call to Adventure
Initiation	3. Crossing the threshold
	4. Road of Trials
	5. Victory
Return	6. Return to the ordinary world

For example, in the story of 'Jack and the Beanstalk', we begin in the 'ordinary world', with Jack living in poverty with his grandmother. This ordinary world is then interrupted by a 'call to adventure', which initiates the action of the story (on his way to sell the family cow, Jack meets the man with the magic beans). We then leave the ordinary world and begin the 'initiation' of the main character, as he crosses the threshold into the special, enhanced world of adventure (Jack leaves his familiar world and climbs the beanstalk to discover the giant's castle). Soon the 'road of trials' begins, as the hero overcomes a series of obstacles and/or enemies (as Jack sneaks around the giant's castle, 'liberating' various treasures and avoiding the giant's clutches while doing so). The initiation phase ends with a decisive victory (Jack chops down the beanstalk, killing the giant), and the end of the story finds the hero back in the 'ordinary world' (Jack is safely at home with his grandmother once again).

This, in simple terms, describes the structure of heroic narratives, from the tale of the Buddha's enlightenment (see Nanamoli, 1992) to Donald Trump (1987)'s, *The Art of the Deal*, to countless episodes of TV dramas. How then is this relevant to essay writing? To date, the hero's journey

[1] The reasons for this are too complex to investigate fully here, but one factor is that Campbell was proposing a grand explanatory schema just as Western academia was turning away from 'grand narratives' and towards post-structuralism and postmodernism. Secondly, Campbell was explicitly indebted to C.G. Jung, and Jung has always been eyed with suspicion by the academy (see for example Noll, 1997).

has been used almost exclusively as a model for the student's *experience* of the essay writing process of essay-writing (e.g., Moore, 2013; DePorres & Livingstone, 2016; Regalado, Gorgas & Burgess, 2017; Batty, Ellison, Owens, & Brien, 2020). Moore (2013) offers a typical example of this approach, writing that

> … the struggles of academic writing are not dissimilar to the struggles associated with any journey into the unknown, and using the 'hero's journey' as a framework to help student writing processes could be a helpful way for both students and their supervisors. (p. 207)

Whatever the merits of this line of thinking may be, it is not the approach that I propose to take here. Rather than seeing the student's writing *process* as a heroic narrative, I propose that the *end result* of this process, the text of the essay itself, can be seen as an expression of the heroic narrative. To the best of my knowledge, this has been suggested only once before by Houslay (2016), who observes in a blog post that empirical research reports share the structure of heroic narratives. However, this paper will concentrate on the essay and its similarities to the heroic narrative. I suggest that the skilful essay-writer first organises his/her experience of research and thinking into a coherent heroic journey narrative, culminating in the achievement of a convincing answer to the essay question, and then in the course of the essay, guides the reader through the same heroic journey. In order to make this claim, it will be necessary to elaborate the structure and features of the heroic narrative in more detail and then to trace the correspondences between this structure and the typical academic essay.

3. Stages and features of the heroic narrative

3.1. The first act: Departure

Table 2 shows some elements of the first phase of the heroic narrative, the 'departure'. As we have seen, the first stage of the heroic narrative presents us with the world as it is, before the action of the story begins. Typically, the very first line of the story will tell us when and/or where the story takes place, as in the famous line that 'crawls' across the screen at the beginning of *Star Wars*, 'A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away' (Kurtz & Lucas, 1977). We then meet the protagonist in their 'ordinary' state, before the action of the story begins. We meet Frodo Baggins, for example, at home in the Shire during the preparations for Bilbo's 'eleventy-first' birthday party (Tolkein, 1954; Osborne, Walsh, Sanders, & Jackson, 2001), or we meet Luke Skywalker living as a simple farm-boy on Tatooine, bored and longing to leave.

Table 2. The *Ordinary World* and some features of the *Call to Adventure*.

Stage	Features
1. Ordinary world	establishing time and place
2. Call to Adventure	a problem to overcome a promise of something better both

Then some event interrupts the ordinary world and summons the protagonist out of their familiar sphere. The film, *Alien* (Carroll, Giler, Hill, & Scott, 1979), has a classic example of this 'call to adventure': Officer Ripley and her crewmates are sleeping peacefully in 'stasis' as their spacecraft speeds through interstellar space when they are suddenly awakened by a distress signal from an unknown source, which requires investigation. The call to adventure may take the form of a problem to be overcome (Frodo has to get rid of the Ring), or a promise of something better (the possibility of Jack getting some magic beans in exchange for his cow). In more fully elaborated

heroic narratives, the call to adventure may involve both problems to deal with and good things to pursue; for example, in *Star Wars*, the Empire has killed Luke's aunt and uncle, *and* he sees the possibility of becoming a Jedi, *and* he wants to find and help the mysterious princess in the recording.

Table 3 shows some further salient features of the second stage of 'departure', *the call to adventure*. Very often, when the call comes along, the hero will try to refuse it and will prefer to stay in familiar territory. When the dwarves arrive at Bilbo Baggins' door to take him off to the Lonely Mountain, he has no interest whatsoever in leaving the comfort of his home (Tolkein, 1937); when Obi-Wan presses Luke to go to Alderaan with him and learn the ways of the Force, Luke refuses. The hero is often highly unwilling to cross the threshold and enter the dangerous and heightened realm of 'initiation', and is often forced to do so, either by circumstances or by the deliberate action of another character.

Table 3. The *Call to Adventure* continued.

Stage	Features
2. Call to Adventure	Refusal of the call
	Meeting the 'mentor' (an old man, a fairy godmother)
	Glimpse of a happy end-state
	Maps and directions

In *The Hobbit*, it is Gandalf who initiates Bilbo's adventure against Bilbo's own wishes, and Gandalf illustrates another common feature of this phase of a story: the appearance on the scene of a 'mentor', often a wise old man or a fairy godmother. At this point in the story, the protagonist may also get a premonitory glimpse of their goal, or of the happy end-state which they might hope to achieve if the adventure is successful. A classic example of this comes from the Arthurian myths, when a vision of the Holy Grail appears above the Round Table at Camelot, and many of the knights set off on their various quests to find the Grail in reality (Wood, 2102).

One more point to note at this phase of the story is that, before the quest can actually begin, the protagonist needs to know where they are going. "I will take the Ring to Mordor," says Frodo at the Council of Elrond, "though I do not know the way" (Osborne, Walsh, Sanders, & Jackson, 2001). As a result, towards the end of this phase of the story there is often some business with maps and directions. Robert Louis Stevenson's, *Treasure Island*, gives a clear example of this, as the map showing the location of the treasure is a crucial feature of the story (Stevenson, 1883).

3.2. The second act: Initiation

As Table 4 shows, our protagonist now crosses the threshold and enters a new, more exciting, more dangerous realm, and begins to explore. This early phase of exploration is often relatively upbeat and light-hearted, as the darker and more threatening forces have not yet come into view. In *Star Wars*, we might think here of the optimistic scene aboard the Millennium Falcon, where Luke is practicing with his light sabre while R2D2 plays holographic chess against Chewbacca. A similar scene in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Osborne, Walsh, Sanders, & Jackson, 2001), takes place at the Prancing Pony in Bree, with the young Hobbits excitedly drinking pints of ale and dancing.

However, soon matters turn darker, and the conflicts, struggles and tribulations of the story begin in earnest. Following Campbell, this central phase of the story is often called, *the Road of Trials*. The protagonist will have to face various enemies (orcs, Black Riders, Shelob; stormtroopers, TIE fighters, tentacled creatures in the trash compactor), and will be accompanied and assisted by allies (Merry and Pippin, Legolas and Gimli, Han and Chewbacca, R2D2 and C3P0). The hero or

heroine and their party will not come through *the Road of Trials* without losing or sacrificing something, or even someone. We might think here of *Jaws* and of the old sea captain Quint, one of the protagonist's central allies, who is killed near the denouement of the story (Zanuck, Brown, & Spielberg, 1975). As Ripley, the protagonist of *Alien*, proceeds along her *Road of Trials*, she loses all her allies one by one (apart from the ship's cat, Jones), and eventually has to sacrifice her ship itself in order to escape with her life.

For the narrative to be satisfactory, the Road of Trials must end with the defeat of the most powerful antagonist; if Brody had not killed the shark at the film's climax, *Jaws* would have felt like an incomplete story. In the first *Star Wars* film, Luke does not decisively vanquish Darth Vader, and this is how we know that the story is incomplete and a sequel is coming.

Table 4. *Crossing the Threshold* and *the Road of Trials*.

Stage	Features
3. Crossing the threshold	Exploring the new landscape
4. Road of Trials	Conflicts, struggles, tribulations
	Allies
	Enemies
	Loss and sacrifice
	Defeating the most powerful enemy

3.3. The third act: Return

The defeat of the most powerful enemy may correspond to the hero or heroine's final victory (stage 5 in Table 5), or these two may be distinct, but in one way or another *the Road of Trials* ends with the protagonist finally achieving what they needed to do (Luke destroys the Death Star; Frodo destroys the Ring). The adventure successfully completed, the hero returns to the ordinary world, but it is important to note that the hero brings back benefits, not only for themselves, but for the larger community. By the end of his story, Jack has brought back the goose that lays the golden eggs so that he and his grandmother will no longer have to live in poverty; by the end of *Return of the Jedi*, Luke and his companions have not only dealt with their own pressing problems, but have also liberated the galaxy from the tyranny of the Empire.

Table 5. *Victory* and the *Return to the Ordinary World*.

Stage	Features
5. Victory	
6. Return to the Ordinary World	Bringing benefits to the community

4. The academic essay as a heroic narrative

Having set out the structure and key features of the heroic narrative in a little more detail, we can now begin to trace correspondences with the structure and key features of the academic essay. We can begin by observing the clear correspondence between the tripartite structure of the hero's journey and the tripartite structure of the essay, as in Table 6.

If we look again at each of the three acts of the heroic journey, we will see the extent of the correspondences between them.

Table 6. Tripartite structures of the two genres.

Heroic narrative	Academic essay
departure	introduction
initiation	main body
return	conclusion

4.1. The introduction

In considering the relationship between the departure phase of the hero's journey and the introduction of the essay, I have in mind a basic four-part model of the introduction, as my colleagues and I teach it at Durham University:

1. Opening statement
2. Focus on the issue under discussion.
3. Thesis statement
4. Signposting

With this in mind, we can turn our attention to the features of the departure phase and their correspondences with the Introduction, as presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Some features of the *Departure* and the *Introduction*.

Stage	Features	Generic move / feature in essay
1. Ordinary world	establishing time and place	Introduction move 1: opening statement
2. Call to Adventure	a problem to overcome a promise of something better	Introduction Move 2: focus on the issue under discussion

The heroic narrative begins by establishing the time and place in which the story will take place ("Long ago in a galaxy far, far away" (Kurtz & Lucas, 1977); the essay begins by establishing time and place in exactly the same way ("In today's modern globalised world…"). Broadly, the function of the 'opening statement' in an essay introduction is to present the general situation before the essay's central issue has been introduced, and to establish the context in which the 'action' of the essay will take place, just as the 'ordinary world' stage of the heroic story introduces the protagonist's situation before their central issue has been introduced and sets the scene for the action of the story. This central problem or impetus of the essay appears in the second part of the introduction, the 'focus on the problem under discussion', just as the hero or heroine's central problem or impetus appears as the 'call to adventure'. The 'problem under discussion' may be a problem already existing in the literature or in practice, or it may be a new idea that the writer proposes, just as the 'call to adventure' may be a problem to solve or a good thing to achieve. In more sophisticated essays, as in more elaborate quest stories, it may be a more complex combination of both.

The hero or heroine's refusal of the call does not seem to correspond to a particular element of the academic essay, but we could argue that it corresponds to the presumed attitude of the reader: when writing an essay we must assume that the reader is a critical reader and will not be willing to participate in the intellectual journey of the essay, so we must compel them by the force of our logic and evidence, as the heroic protagonist will not be not be willing to undertake the adventure and must be compelled to do so. The glimpse of a happy end state sometimes shown to the protagonist at the beginning of the story corresponds to the third move in our basic introduction, the thesis statement, in which the reader of the essay sees the final goal which the essay is moving

towards, even though this goal has not been attained yet, and there are many trials and tribulations to undergo before it is finally accomplished. Some essays involve a mentor, in the person of the particular theorist or theoretical system, on whom the writer will depend. For example, where we see in the introduction of an essay a sentence like, 'This essay will present a Lacanian analysis of Kurasawa's later films …', Jacques Lacan is in the role of mentor, providing the protagonist of the essay with the tools and guidance necessary for the adventure to come. The map of Treasure Island corresponds to the fourth move of the introduction, the signposting, where we find a map of the territory that we will cover as we proceed through the next section of the essay, through various difficulties and conflicts, towards the attainment of the final goal.

Table 8. The *Departure* and the *Introduction* continued.

Stage	Features	Generic move / feature in essay
2. Call to Adventure	Refusal of the call	*The reader* will refuse the call and will need to be 'compelled'.
	Glimpse of a happy end-state.	Introduction move 3: thesis statement
	Meeting the 'mentor', an old man, a fairy godmother.	Introducing the theorist / theoretical system that the writer will depend on.
	Maps and directions	Introduction move 4: signposting

4.2. The main body

Essays typically include definitions of key terms and concepts, and other expository material. These elements are sometimes incorporated into the introduction or interwoven throughout the essay, but in many essays, we find a section devoted to definitions and/or exposition, immediately after the introduction and before the argumentation proper has begun. This section corresponds to the relatively light-hearted phase of the narrative which immediately follows the crossing of the threshold into the world of the story, before the drama has begun in earnest.

Table 9. The *Initiation* and the *Main Body* of the essay.

Stage	Features	Generic move / feature in essay
3. Crossing the threshold	Exploring the New Landscape	Definitions / Expository Sections after the Introduction
4. Road of Trials	Conflicts, struggles, tribulations	Arguments, counter-arguments, and refutations
	Allies	Material from the reading that the writer accepts
	Enemies	Material from the reading which the writer rejects and must argue against
	Loss and sacrifice	Concessions
	Defeating the most powerful enemy	Taking on the opposing position in its strongest form ('principle of charity')

The essay then enters its *Road of Trials*, with arguments, counterarguments, and refutations standing in for the hero's conflicts, struggles, and tribulations. In this section of the argumentative

essay, the writer will be presenting material from the literature, and setting ideas against one another to demonstrate which is stronger, and/or presenting original critiques of other writers' work. Thus, the material from the reading will broadly be divided into 'allies' (that which the writer accepts) and 'enemies' (that which the writer rejects and must argue or 'do battle' against).

Of course, it is not always possible to classify every text discussed in a given essay as an 'ally' or an 'enemy'. Some of the texts referred to may fulfil more ambivalent functions. For example, perhaps the essay writer disagrees strongly with the main thrust of a particular text, but nevertheless finds within it some useful evidence or a strong argument that can be extracted and used to support the writer's own conclusions. Texts that fall into this grey area between ally and enemy would correspond to a class of characters in heroic narratives sometimes called 'shapeshifters' (Vogler, 2007), characters who are neither straightforwardly helping the hero nor straightforwardly opposing them, but who shift between the two roles. The character of Ash in *Alien* is a classic example of the shapeshifter: he initially appears to be just another crewmember and ally, but we later discover that he is fact an enemy of Ripley and her crew, and indeed he is not even the human he appeared to be, but is in fact an android.

The journey, as we have seen, will involve loss and sacrifice, and this points towards a dimension of essay-writing which perhaps receives less attention in EAP than it should: concessions. As we construct and present our arguments in our essay, it is likely that we will have to concede at least some points to the 'other side'. It is a rare essay which reaches its conclusion without needing to qualify its argument even slightly, and an essay which does present its conclusion as unqualified is likely to be suspect.

The principle of charity states that when we are arguing against a given position, we must present and critique that position in its strongest and most compelling form; otherwise, our argument will be unsatisfactory to our readers. Similarly, the hero must defeat the strongest and most powerful enemy, otherwise the heroic tale will be unsatisfactory to the audience.

4.3. The conclusion

We normally expect the conclusion of an argumentative essay to consist of a restatement of the position as first stated in the thesis statement, a summary of the argumentative process by which this position has been 'achieved', and sometimes some discussion of the implications of this conclusion for the field. Once again, these elements correspond to the elements of the final stage of a heroic quest story: the restatement of the 'achieved' position corresponds to the final victory, and the discussion of the implications corresponds to the return to the ordinary world and the 'boon' the hero brings back to the community at large (Table 10).

Table 10. *Victory* and the *Return to the Ordinary World*.

Stage	Features	Generic move / feature in essay
5. Victory		Conclusion: summary of 'achieved' position
6. Return to the ordinary world	Bringing benefits to the community	Conclusion: implications for the field

5. Implications

If the case I have made here is persuasive, this suggests that an essay that receives a high mark may do so in part because it has satisfied the marker's narrative expectations, much the same way as *Star Wars* or *Lord of the Rings* does, and that a low-scoring essay could be one that leaves the marker's legitimate narrative expectations unfulfilled.

It further suggests that we might think of an essay as an adventure, rather than an act of 'production'. We frequently hear academic writers, including students, characterized as 'knowledge producers', and the business of the university as 'production of knowledge'; an industrial metaphor, conjuring images of the factory and the production-line. If there is a correspondence between the essay and the heroic journey, I hope this might suggest a different view of the essay: we might think of the writing or reading of an essay not merely as the production or consumption of another unit of 'product', but as a bold journey into the unknown, involving genuine risks and the hope of a truly meaningful achievement.

Finally, this correspondence between story-structure and essay-structure could conceivably be a basis upon which one might teach the skills of essay-reading and essay-writing. If one can identify a heroic narrative which is familiar to the cohort of students one is teaching, or have one's students read or watch a suitable heroic narrative, this could be a useful way to introduce the structure and key features of essay-writing, especially to students who are relatively new to academic work of this kind. In my own work as a teacher of English for Academic Purposes to cohorts of international students at a UK university, finding heroic narratives sufficiently familiar or engaging to all students in a given cohort has to date proved challenging (and I am sorry to report that the most obvious contender, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Heyman & Columbus, 2001), is not, in fact, a heroic quest story and therefore cannot be easily exploited in this way). If any of my fellow teachers of essay writing feel inclined to exploit the ideas presented above in their own teaching, I warmly encourage them to do so.

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