

Narrative Permutation and Formalist Theory: A Technical Analysis of Matt Madden's 99 Ways to Tell a Story

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In the domain of narratology and visual communication, the concept of structural variation serves as a cornerstone for understanding how information is decoded by an audience. Matt Madden's seminal work, **99 Ways to Tell a Story: Exercises in Style** (2005), functions not merely as a graphic novel but as a comprehensive technical manual for narrative permutation. Inspired by Raymond Queneau's 1947 Oulipian masterpiece *Exercices de style*, Madden's work transposes the constraints of potential literature into the medium of sequential art. This analysis explores the technical frameworks, structuralist principles, and combinatorial logic that underpin Madden's methodology, providing a field guide for storytellers, designers, and communication strategists to navigate the complexities of message delivery.

The Theoretical Framework of Oulipian Constraints

To understand Madden's technical execution, one must first grasp the foundational principles of the **Oulipo** (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle) movement. Oulipo emphasizes the use of constrained writing techniques as a mechanism to trigger creativity and bypass habitual cognitive patterns. In *99 Ways to Tell a Story*, the constraint is the repetition of a singular, mundane event: a man rises from his desk, walks into a kitchen, is asked the time by someone in the room, realizes he forgot what he was looking for, and returns to his desk. This "base narrative" serves as the control variable in a vast experiment involving narrative variables.

The Mechanism of Potentiality

The technical objective of Madden's work is to demonstrate that the **Information Architecture** of a story is secondary to its **Mode of Representation**. By fixing the plot (the 'what'), the focus shifts entirely to the discourse (the 'how'). This is critical for technical writers and content architects who must deliver the same core data across diverse platforms, such as technical documentation, marketing collateral, and internal white papers.

Taxonomy of Narrative Variations

Madden categorizes his 99 iterations into distinct modal groups. These can be analyzed through a technical lens as specific "Narrative Filters" applied to a dataset. The following table illustrates the primary classification of these exercises based on their structural intent:

Category	Technical Objective	Example Variations
Perspective & Point of View	Altering the spatial and psychological coordinates of the observer.	First Person, Subjective, Bird's Eye, Extreme Close-up.
Genre & Style	Applying established visual and linguistic semiotics of specific traditions.	Noir, Sci-Fi, Super-Hero, Public Service Announcement.
Formalist/Structural	Deconstructing the physical components of the comic medium.	One Panel, No Text, Map, Sequence.
Linguistic & Semiologic	Exploring the relationship between signifier and signified.	Morse Code, Binary, Haiku, Parody of Advertising.
Temporal Manipulations	Distorting the sequence and flow of time within the narrative.	Flashback, Flash-forward, Real-time.

Core Mechanics: Deconstructing the One-Page Template

Madden's technical brilliance lies in his adherence to a rigid grid system, which allows for direct comparison between variations. For the technical communicator, this represents a **Control Group** in experimental design. Each page typically follows a multi-panel sequence that establishes the setting, the action, the dialogue, and the resolution. By maintaining a consistent **Baseline Schema**, Madden highlights how minor adjustments in line weight, shading, or framing can fundamentally alter the user's emotional and cognitive response.

The Combinatorial Logic of Narrative

From an algorithmic perspective, storytelling can be viewed as a series of decision nodes. Madden explores these nodes through a mathematical-like exploration of possibilities. If we define the narrative (N) as a function of Plot (P), Perspective (V), and Style (S), we can express it as:

$$N = " (P, V, S)$$

Where P is constant, the resulting variations are the product of varying V and S. This systematic approach is essential for large-scale content operations where brand voice must be maintained while adapting to different user personas.

Step-by-Step Technical Analysis of Key Exercises

1. The Subjective Variation

In the "Subjective" exercise, Madden uses a first-person perspective (POV). The technical challenge here is the **Occlusion of the Narrator**. Because the reader sees through the eyes of the protagonist, the character's physical appearance is hidden, forcing the narrative to rely on internal monologue and hand-eye coordination visuals. This mirrors the "User-Centric Design" principle in technical writing, where instructions are framed from the direct perspective of the operator.

2. The Binary Variation

By translating the narrative into 1s and 0s, Madden explores the extreme limits of **Data Abstraction**. While the literal story is lost to anyone without a binary-to-ASCII converter, the formal structure (the sequence of bits)

remains. This exercise demonstrates the importance of **Semantic Clarity**; when the delivery mechanism (the code) becomes too complex, the message (the story) is obscured, a common failure mode in overly technical documentation.

3. The Map Variation

In this iteration, the narrative is stripped of sequential panels and replaced with a floor plan showing the character's movement. This is a transition from **Temporal Sequencing** to **Spatial Mapping**. In a professional context, this is akin to replacing a step-by-step procedure with a logic flow diagram or a system architecture map. It provides high-level situational awareness at the cost of granular action detail.

Comparative Evaluation: Sequential Art vs. Technical Documentation

The following matrix evaluates how the principles found in *99 Ways to Tell a Story* apply to the professional technical writing field:

Storytelling Variable	Comic Application (Madden)	Technical Writing Application
Contextual Framing	Using genre (e.g., Noir) to set mood.	Setting the environment (e.g., Production vs. Staging).
Pacing	Panel size and gutter width.	Paragraph length and the use of white space.
Iconicity	Simplification of character features.	Use of standardized icons (Warning, Note, Info).
Redundancy	Repeating the same story 99 times.	Multi-channel content (Docs, Videos, Tooltips).

Practical Implementation: Exercises for Content Strategists

Content strategists can utilize Madden's methodology to audit and improve brand messaging. By conducting "Style Exercises" on core brand pillars, teams can identify the most effective modes of communication for different demographics. Below is a procedural guide for implementing a narrative audit based on Madden's framework:

1. Define the Atomic Narrative: Identify the core message or user task that must be communicated. Ensure it is stripped of all non-essential descriptors.
2. Select Five Modalities: Choose five distinct styles from Madden's taxonomy (e.g., Technical/Dry, Empathetic/Human, Abstract/Visual, Urgent/Action-Oriented, and Narrative/Story-driven).
3. Execute Drafts: Rewrite the core message in each of the five styles, adhering strictly to the constraints of each modality.
4. Perform A/B Testing: Present the variations to a sample of the target audience to measure comprehension speed and emotional resonance.
5. Analyze Results: Use the data to determine which stylistic choices align best with the project's KPIs (Key Performance Indicators).

Field Guide: Overcoming Creative Blocks with Systematic Variation

Technical writers often encounter "The Curse of Knowledge," where they become too familiar with a subject to explain it simply. Madden's exercises provide a technical solution to this psychological hurdle. By forcing the writer to adopt a "Paranoid" or "Minimalist" lens, they are forced to re-evaluate the sequence of information. This process often reveals **Logical Gaps** in the original documentation that were previously overlooked.

Troubleshooting Narrative Failures

When a narrative fails to connect with an audience, it is usually due to a mismatch between the **Medium** and the **Message**. In Madden's book, certain variations like the "Political" version might obscure the original plot in favor of rhetorical posturing. In technical fields, this is comparable to "Marketing Fluff" contaminating a "Quick Start Guide." The solution is to return to the "Template" or "Control Group" (Madden's base story) and re-establish the primary objective before reapplying necessary stylistic filters.

The Mathematical Model of Visual Semiotics

A deeper analysis of Madden's work reveals a system of **Visual Semiotics** that can be quantified. If we consider the comic page as a 2D grid of information (I), where $I = \{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$ panels, the relationship between panels

defines the **Narrative Velocity (Vn)**. Madden modulates Vn by varying the amount of information in each panel. For instance, the "Slow Motion" version increases the panel count for the same action, decreasing Vn, whereas the "One Panel" version collapses the entire dataset into a single point, maximizing Vn but risking information overload.

Comparison of Informational Density

- High Density (The Map): Provides all spatial data at once. Requires high cognitive load for the user to parse the sequence.
- Low Density (The Haiku): Provides minimal data points. Relies heavily on the user's prior knowledge to fill in the gaps.
- Balanced Density (The Template): Optimal for general instruction, balancing time (sequence) and space (composition).

Broader Implications for the Digital Age

As we move into an era dominated by AI-generated content and fragmented attention spans, the ability to manipulate "Exercises in Style" becomes a vital skill. Large Language Models (LLMs) are essentially advanced engines for narrative permutation, capable of rewriting the same input in thousands of styles. However, without the structuralist understanding demonstrated by Matt Madden, these permutations lack intentionality and strategic value.

Madden's *99 Ways to Tell a Story* serves as a reminder that creativity is not just a divine spark but a **Procedural System**. By studying the ways in which a simple event can be distorted, amplified, or abstracted, we gain mastery over the tools of communication. Whether designing a user interface, writing a software manual, or crafting a marketing campaign, the principles of variation and constraint remain the most powerful tools in a technical writer's arsenal. The ultimate lesson is that there is no such thing as a neutral style; every choice in perspective, tone, and format is a technical decision that shapes the final output's efficiency and impact.

In conclusion, the legacy of Madden's work lies in its democratization of the creative process. By breaking down the complex art of storytelling into 99 discrete, technical exercises, he provides a roadmap for anyone tasked with the clear and effective transmission of ideas. The project proves that constraints are not barriers to expression, but rather the very catalysts that make deep, multifaceted communication possible.

Tags: #Matt Madden #99 Ways to Tell a Story #Oulipo #Narratology #Technical Writing #Content Strategy

