



## Story anchors: how do they look in a real text?

A sure-fire way to strengthen the “Why” of any text is to include a story anchor early on, ideally in the first paragraph. What is a story anchor? In essence, it’s a fancy way of saying “something concrete that illustrates a bigger theme”. And I will say it straight up: it could be as short as a single word, or as long as a few sentences, depending on context. A story anchor is not defined by its word count, but by its capacity to encapsulate and release meaning. At its best, it purposely triggers a semantic field, yielding valuable connotations, images, emotions, and ideas. Take the *cane toad*. Yep, that’s right: the cane toad. What happens as you read that phrase? Do you see one in your mind? Or two? Many? What are you hearing, feeling, or thinking of? Is it the memory of that holiday, back when you were little? The sound of that rain and those cane toads, perhaps. Remarkable creatures, and powerful story anchors.

We once put a cane toad in an ARC Discovery Project grant application from a team of biologists. Their larger theme? Invasive species (of course). Their original draft was full of mid-level abstractions, with no semantic field triggers, or story anchors, that could vividly illustrate what their work was about.

Here is an excerpt from their original first page, which was sent to us for editing:

### **What role does behavioural variation play in the success of invasive animals?**

#### AIMS AND BACKGROUND

Each day, human activities inadvertently carry individuals from thousands of different animal species to regions outside their native range. Only a small fraction of these will actually become invasive. In fact, it seems that some species are repeatedly successful at establishing themselves in new locations, while others will repeatedly fail. So, what determines whether an accidental introduction will be a hit or a miss?

We know that life history traits, climate, and propagule pressure (the number of individuals transported to a non-native region) can all be important in invasion success – but what about behaviour? The role of behaviour in the invasion of new areas is important because we know that behaviour determines the rate at which invasive species spread as well as the severity of their impact on native biota.

According to two recent reviews, both inter- and intra-population *variation* in behaviour can also play a critical role in allowing species to overcome the many obstacles needed to become invasive. Here, in the first study of its kind, we will test four key predictions of how behavioural variation can affect invasion success.

Let’s look at that first paragraph for a moment. Here, we read of “human activities”, “thousands of different animal species”, and various “regions” and “individuals.” All of these terms are more or less generic; no specific human activity, animal species, concrete region, or identifiable individual is mentioned.

Borrowing Jacqui Banaszynski’s idea of the ladder of abstraction, we could argue that the story of this research grant has nothing to “ground” it yet, leaving it faceless – and worst of all, boring to read. How to cut through such vagueness? By adding specificity.

Let’s return to the cane toad. When Isabella Rossellini fronts the cosmetics advertisements of beauty giant Lancôme, she embodies their message. Like any good story anchor, she provides a projective space for the imagination, hopes, fears, and dreams of viewers and readers.



Condensed into her name and face is a whole field of meanings, a history of connotations, and a collective cultural memory. In short: Isabella Rossellini acts as a powerful semantic trigger to enhance the relevance of Lancôme’s message and product. Cane toads are similar – but only a little. They are uglier, which is why we paired the cane toad with the sea star in our reworking of the biologists’ grant application. In this way, we grounded the duo’s grant theme – invasive species and the damage they cause – by using two invasive cover models. We selected these examples deliberately, but other invasive species could have figured in their place.

It’s a minimal intervention: two words only, to add specificity. The power of story anchors does not lie in their size. It lies in their capacity to make visible, and *keep* visible, the broader topic of the piece – like a floating balloon tied on a shopping trolley roaming the mall (or continuing with our other metaphor, tied on the bottom rung of the ladder of abstraction). Observe its impact in this re-writing:

## **A paradox of variation: Behavioural rigidity and flexibility in the success of invasive animals**

### **AIMS AND BACKGROUND**

Invasive animals wreak havoc on ecosystems in Australia and its region. While the *biology* of such intruders as cane toads and Northern Pacific sea stars is subject to intense scrutiny, the *behaviour* of introduced species is far less studied. But animal behaviour is an important contributor to successful invasion, with significant ecological and economic consequences.

Which behavioural factors help determine invasion success or failure? A key piece in the biosecurity puzzle. Putting this piece firmly in place will be vital to the protection of Australia’s unique habitats. Human amenity is affected also, as are industries that depend on those habitats such as agriculture, fisheries, and tourism. (The sea star alone imposes an annual cost above \$500 million on Australia’s shellfish fishery, including abalone, cockles, scallops, and mussels; and reef tourism is also affected.)

Biological factors at the species level include suitable life history and climate adaptation, along with a sufficient *propagule pressure* (the number of individuals pushing to invade). These are identified drivers of success. Recent studies have already added behaviour to the research mix, so far with species-level, single-behaviour research (“What behavioural characteristic helps this species succeed?”). Determining such inter-species variation yields valuable data for biosecurity efforts – to concentrate resources on the high-risk intruders.

But there is much more to be said. Looking closely at an invasive species, we find wide variations in individual behaviour. How will such variation affect the overall invasiveness of the species? Our team has already done pioneering work *narrowing* attention to focus on individuals, and *broadening* attention to explore behavioural syndromes (whole suites of correlated behavioural tendencies). Our internationally recognised research (more than 800 citations per paper) reveals the salient importance of behavioural or “personality” types in animals. Given the findings so far, these factors seem to affect how individuals interact with each other and their environment; and they do promise to shed light on why species vary so much in their invasion success.

Combining knowledge from invasion ecology with the literature on behavioural syndromes, we have uncovered an intriguing paradox. It arises from two facts ...



You may notice other editorial interventions here: the introduction of the themes of “paradox” and “puzzle”. As story coaches and editors at Mind Your Way, we listen out for such things when we meet or speak with our clients. We take notice of the semantic fields they unknowingly tap into as they describe their work. Talking to our biologist duo, I found myself taken on an action-packed international hunt after secret animal invaders, intercepting them on boats and at every stop along their journeys, to see the puzzle of their subversive success uncovered. I could not help but imagine the biologists as secret agents, or the protagonists of a thriller. It was both riveting and intriguing to hear their heroic narrative unfold.

How much of this could go into the grant application? Only a little; but a little goes a long way. Given the genre constraints of the research grant application, it is wise to respect Stephen Heard’s warning that “some readers may be put off by excessive playfulness or stylistic flourishes”. But as Heard points out, a sound, well-positioned story anchor or metaphor may increase “the probability that a paper is published, read, and cited. Readers may be more likely to read a paper that promises enjoyment, may be more likely to finish such a paper and remember (and cite) it later, and may be more likely to recommend an enjoyable paper to colleagues.” A memorable work stands a greater chance of being recommended for a grant, a prize, or publication. Implanting such memorability is our mission as text minding specialists at Mind Your Way.

### **Of aimlessly floating boats: How to increase specificity**

As we’ve seen, you can anchor a drifting narrative by inserting examples, anecdotes, case studies, scenarios, and even figurative language. Helen Sword articulates the notion that “abstract concepts become more memorable and accessible the moment we ground them in the material world, the world that our readers can see and touch” (*Stylish Academic Writing*, 2012, p. 108). Of course, the trick is to use not just *any* example or anecdote, but one that powerfully embodies the overarching theme of the text.

The cultures of some disciplines encourage more abstract discourse, while others allow for extended immersion in concrete detail. More often than not, academic texts offer too few examples, anecdotes, metaphors, or concrete information. The result? A less engaging story. (Revisit Handout 4 to go through Sword’s exercises for using examples, anecdotes, case studies, scenarios, and figurative language that will help you increase specificity in your text.)

In the context of story anchors, it is worth recounting Sword’s example of scenario use by educational researcher Peter Clough (*Stylish Academic Writing*, 2012, p. 95):

*My problem with Molly is not that he lacks words, but rather that they spill out of him with a wild, fairground pulse: they are sparklers, he waves them splashing around him. And my other problem is that many of them are not very nice; they are squibs that make you jump out of the way. For the moment I think that they are my only problems.*

With “Molly”, the story of a delinquent child and the teacher who tries in vain to save him, educator Peter Clough offers an emotionally wrenching case study that helps its readers understand how easily the product of a dysfunctional family can slip through the cracks of the British school system. The catch – one that will give many researchers pause – is that Molly is not a real boy. Both he and the narrator are composite fictional characters created by Clough to communicate the “deeper truths” of professional and personal experience. To “tell the truth as one sees it,” Clough believes, sometimes “data may have to be manipulated to serve that larger purpose.”



For some academics, Clough’s defense of data manipulation is indefensible. His whole scholarly project, however, is “to rattle the bars which see *any* given social science methods as throwing up around attempts to characterize experience.” Clough’s argument is twofold. First, he encourages researchers to tell stories that hold our attention, help us make sense of the world, and validate the “vitally constitutive role of language” in constructing knowledge. Second, he questions the supremacy of social science methodologies that suppress personal engagement: “Despite the sterility of our instruments, we never come innocent to a research task.” Through the power of fiction, Clough explores “the ethnographer’s dilemma – the conscious theft of glimpses of people’s lives in the interests of research.” [Helen Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing* (HUP 2012), p. 95]

Clearly, Peter Clough’s fictional scenario exemplifies a more elaborate story anchor than the minimalist reference to “cane toads and Northern Pacific sea stars” in our biologists’ ARC Linkage Grant application. Yet it equally serves to illustrate the larger theme of his writing. Is it not liberating to realise that a story anchor can be as small as a few words – easy to implement, and gentle on those conservative academic readers (in case you are concerned how they might judge your text)? Other story anchors require a bit more words, courage, and creativity. It all depends on how far you will dare to go!