

The Epic, The Tragedy and The Surreal: Narratives of a Disabled Physics Student



Physics Education
Research Group

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<https://tinyurl.com/ETSurr>

The Key Points of Narrative Analysis

The What?^{1, 2, 3}

Narrative Analysis:

- turns experiences into stories, centering the interviewee as the main character
- examines the story's, structure, function, substance, and performance
- asks "what is the genre", "who is the protagonist"?

The Why?^{2, 3}

- Center personal stories of disabled students, allowing the disabled student to be the main character.
- Counter story-telling challenges assumptions and practices of ableism within the physics community

Participant Details

- Pseudonym: Aaron
- Completed an undergraduate degree in physics, currently pursuing a physics PhD.
- Switched physics research sub-disciplines during grad school.
- Identifies as neurodiverse and has a hearing impairment, and presents with other marginalized identities and privileged identities

An Excerpt from Aaron's Story

Why I'm now doing [new research concentration] – Uh, the first one was my [physics] professor, uh.

I, I emailed him was like 'Hey I'm autistic, (1s) help? Uh, like do better.' Um, and he was like 'okay cool I'll read a little bit about autism. I've never heard of uh, ADS' - oh, ASD, Autism Spectrum Disorder. **Um**, but like 'yeah, I'll see what I can do' and then immediately responding with,

(2s) 'Oh, sorry, uh, nothing I can do about that, umm, without like formal ODS [Office of Disability Services] stuff' umm. And having to go have a back and forth. but being like hey? ODS doesn't help me very much. Umm

[Aaron discussed the specific accommodations he would need during the semester, and the professor's polite but dismissive response to his needs]

A: I think it was something akin to like you 'I know you've had intellectual troubles, uh, this, uh, semester and I was fully ready to just let you, uh, move through, uh.

But uh, I couldn't in good faith (2s), uh, absolve what you did at the beginning of the semester of, uh (1s), not doing well at the beginning of semester. Yes, you improved, uh, but not enough to my liking. And, uh, So I, I'm going to give you a C+ and come back next year',

uh, which was (2s) **rude**

The Abstract: The summary of the incident³

Aaron orients the story as related to changing research concentration

The Complicating Action: The 'what happened'

Aaron describes emailing the professor for supports related to autism. The professor initially states they do not know about autism, but will look into it

The Orientation: The Who, When, Where?

Who: Aaron and his physics professor
When: In the beginning of taking the class
Where: In an email

The Complicating Action: The 'what happened'

Aaron explains that the professor responded he would only work the formal disability office structure, which Aaron did not find helpful

The Evaluation: Explanation of the purpose

Aaron explains that the professor noted Aaron's class performance improved during the semester, but the professor felt Aaron could not overcome his poor performance at the beginning of the semester, and needed to repeat the course

The Coda: Story ending signal

Aaron ends the story by emphasizing how he felt after the experience

Suggestions for Instructors and Mentors

- Recognize that Dis. Students are the experts of their own experiences
 - Aaron: "professors, not knowing one, uh, or thinking that they can read a couple of papers, and that is the equivalent to my lived experience. Uh, slash, that they would know more... about what I need than I do."
- Continue to learn about supporting access to physics
- Plan for access and implement accessible practices even before a Dis. student enrolls in the course
- Some students require individualized access practices; access needs and accommodations can vary even across students with similar impairments. Invite, but do not require, students to share access needs.
 - Aaron: "Physicists specifically like to do like a one-size fits all, I've noticed and that's just probably due to training as a physicist. Uh, (2s) one-size fits all, if you've met one autistic person, you've met one autistic person, y'know?"

1 - Riessman, Catherine Kohler. *Narrative analysis*. Vol. 30. Sage, 1993

2 - Riessman, Catherine Kohler. *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage, 2008.

3 - Parcell, Erin Sahlstein and Benjamin M. A. Baker. "Narrative Analysis." *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. Edited by Mike Allen. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2017, pp. 1069-72. *SAGE Research Methods*.

4 - Labov, William. "Some further steps in narrative analysis." (1997).