



## MANY POSSIBLE STRUCTURES OF TEXT

**One common structure – a narrative of inquiry.** In the *Harvard Course in Reading and Study Strategies*, we pay particular attention to one common structure text, a narrative of inquiry that tends to include these four components:

- The observations held in tension in the writer's mind
- The writer's unresolved and guiding/governing question
- The supporting/subordinate questions explored by the writer
- The writer's answer to the guiding/governing question

That four-part structure might be explicit or implicit.

**But not all text follows that structure.** There are many possible structures of text. Even if we set aside the broad category of creative literature – novels, short stories, poetry, plays, etc. -- and consider only non-fiction, we encounter many structures, including:

- **Chronological** structure
- **Categorizing/typological** structure
- **Narrative/biographical/story-telling** structure
- **News story** structure (who/what/where/when perhaps followed by how-do-we-make-sense-of-this analysis)
- **Procedural** structure (instructions -- what to do in what order)
- **Information-delivery** structure (e.g., **Q&A** structure, **topic** structure; **take-away points** structure)
- **Associative** structure
- **Discursive** structure
- **Portrait-/instance-/illustration-based** structure
- **Other possibilities . . . .**

**Conventional structures and superstructures.** Here are some conventional structures and superstructures of some sorts of documents we commonly encounter:

Research Article*	Newspaper	Textbook	Non-fiction Book
Title Abstract Section headings Lit Review Problem Hypothesis Methods Results Discussion Summary Implications	Headlines Front Page National/International News Section Headings Metro (local) Editorials/Op.Ed. Arts Living Travel Ideas Comics Sports Business Magazine Automotive Classifieds	Title Contents Intro Chapters Subheadings Summaries Illustrations/ Charts/Graphs Sidebars Questions/Quizzes Problem Sets Index Covers	Title Contents Preface Intro Chapters Subheadings Illustrations/ Charts/Graphs Summary/Conclusion Index Covers
* This structure is essentially a narrative of inquiry, the common four-part structure of inquiry-driven text described above.			

**Two take-away points about structure.** Whatever the structure of a text you are reading, what is important is to recognize that **a text has structure** and that discerning that structure can help you to read and comprehend the text effectively given your purpose(s). Even if you are reading a text that does not follow the common structure of inquiry-driven text we describe in the *Harvard Course in Reading and Study Strategies*, remember that **YOU, as a reader, are inquiry-driven**. Whatever you read – including novels, short stories, poetry, and plays - you can ask questions such as the following:

- How is this text structured?
- What purpose/effect might the writer intend by choosing/crafting this particular structure?
- What is my purpose in reading this text?
- Given my purpose and given how the text is structured, how shall I approach reading it?