

What makes a story successful? Researchers have figured out a way to predict it

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Narrative reversals, or changes in fortune that take characters from heights to depths and vice versa, are a good predictor for how successful a movie, TV show or book will be, Northeastern marketing researchers say.

There are very few universal truths about humanity, but one thing is for

certain: we love stories.

Whether it's movies, TV shows, books, [political campaigns](#) or even advertisements, people are constantly being told or telling stories every day. Entire industries are built around storytelling and understanding which stories connect with people the most.

It's why a group of researchers at Northeastern University have tried to crack the code and answer one question: What makes a [story](#) successful?

"If you watch 'Mad Men,' you see it's more of an art form, having an inspiration of how to tell a beautiful story and everything falls in place and it just magically works," says Yakov Bart, a professor of marketing at Northeastern. "But lately, a lot of people have been thinking maybe it's not just art—maybe there's some science to this as well."

By applying advanced quantitative analysis and [statistical techniques](#) to tens of thousands of movies, TV shows, books and even fundraising pitches, the researchers found one core element of storytelling that helped predict a story's success with audiences: narrative reversals.

Most people are familiar with what a narrative reversal is, even if they don't know it by name. Something is going well for a character—Romeo falls in love with Juliet—only for something bad to happen to that character—Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, is enraged and tries to kill Romeo. Or a character is down in the dumps and has a positive experience that changes things for the better.

"We develop a way, using these advanced text analysis techniques, to quantify and try to measure the frequency and intensity of narrative reversals across a wide set of storytelling contexts," says Samsun Knight, a research affiliate at Northeastern's DATA Initiative and published author.

"We show that this does indeed predict which stories tend to be more successful. This holds even if you look in a given TV show which episodes are more successful."

Using a collection of 30,000 texts, which included TV shows, movies, books and fundraising pitches, the researchers analyzed them based on how positive or negative the language in a given section was. Based on that, they were able to measure how well things are going for the characters in a given story and when that situation changed, or reversed.

They counted the number of reversals that took place in each story, also measuring the frequency and intensity of each reversal, and discovered it's a fairly accurate predictor of how well a story will connect with people. In this case, that meant a movie or TV show's audience rating on IMDb, how frequently people downloaded a book and how much money a fundraising pitch earned.

"It's not the sole determiner of how successful a story is, but we were impressed with its consistency and the fact that it's so simple," Matt Rocklage, an assistant professor of marketing at Northeastern says. "The more of those reversals there are, the more successful these stories are, and the bigger these reversals are, the more successful these stories are."

Knight says this research isn't meant to create a formula for writers to tell their stories, but he hopes it can help writers avoid easy pitfalls when charting their story.

"In the most intuitive sense, people tend not to respond to places where nothing is getting better and nothing is getting worse," Knight says.

"You don't want these sags in your story. ... I love Samuel Beckett—there are exceptions to every rule—but broadly speaking, this type of unit of narrative propulsion tends to be exceptionally important.

Leon Katz, a prominent dramaturg at the Yale School of Drama, called such narrative reversals the 'formal unit' of plot. In the same way that paragraphs are constructed out of sentences, a plot will tend to be structured out of reversals."

Beyond people who are intent on writing the next Oscar-winning screenplay or bestselling novel, Knight says this research highlights how narrative reversals can be a useful tool in more practical contexts too.

For those writing a cover letter to apply to their dream job or working up a fundraising pitch to sell people on their business concept, "tell it like a story," reversals and all, Knight says.

"Tell us where the reversal came in where now you're actually needing to ask for help or tell us where things could maybe come back up if you were to receive that help," Knight says.

"Structuring your communications with this rule of thumb in mind might help get your point across and just engage people more successfully."

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