

**Investigating the effect of narrative transportation on content and extent of written condolence
letters in a WWII-context**

Joost Meerhof

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University of Twente - Department of Psychology

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First supervisor - M. Friehs

Second supervisor - J. Schaij

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Abstract

To find out more about how narrative transportation works and about how condolence letters are written, the effect that narrative transportation has on the emotional content and extent of words written in condolence letters was investigated. This study uses a fictional scenario depicting an event from World War II. The research question was *'To what extent does the level of narrative transportation influence the emotional content or the extent of the written letters?'* A total of 89 responses were recorded for the survey, of which 46 were usable. A correlational analysis was conducted between the scores on the Transportation Scale - Short Form and its subscales to the word count and the emotional content of condolence letters written. With an inter-coder agreement of $\alpha = .75$, there was no significant effect found between narrative transportation and the emotional content ($r(46) = .02, p = .92$) or extent ($r(46) = .13, p = .39$) of the letters written. These results indicate that there is no relation between the two variables. If true, this could have huge implications on many fields. However, some limitations on the study will be discussed that may have impacted the results.

Investigating the effect of narrative transportation on content and extent of written condolence letters in a WWII-context

Imagine two soldiers showing up at your doorstep during the height of World War II. You haven't seen your son in months, as he has been away, fighting a bloody war in the name of your country. With solemn expressions on their faces, the soldiers hand you a letter. You are terrified of the contents of the letter, what the message contained within might reveal about the fate of your son. Unfortunately, many families had to go through such a moment during this war. In that moment when you open the condolence letter, every word counts, every word has to be very precise. How do you write such a letter, when you want to make the horrible message contained within to be as digestible as possible? When you really care - in other words, when you feel immersed or *transported* in the narrative - do you present the message as clear and concise as possible? So as to not overstay your welcome in what should be a morbidly private affair? Or, do you cushion your words? Do you show you are sympathetic to the sorrow of the reader? To answer these questions, a study was designed that had participants write condolence letters from the perspective of a commanding officer in World War II. This leads to the following central research question; 'To what extent does the level of narrative transportation influence the emotional content or the extent of the written letters?'

For a satisfying answer, the concept of narrative transportation will first need to be defined. To this end, a working definition of narrative will be discussed. Hereafter, a demarcation of narrative transportation will be presented. Then, a broader overview of the effects of narrative transportation will be given, which is followed by conditions that limit narrative transportation. Hereafter, a broader overview of literature on narrative transportation will be presented. Finally, narrative transportation in the present study will be explained, during which two hypotheses will be formulated.

Defining narrative

There has been a lot of discourse on the subject of defining the term 'narrative'. Firstly, Laer et al. (2014) make the case in their extensive meta-analysis of 76 articles that the terms 'narrative' and 'story' seem to be used almost interchangeably in previous works on the subject (e.g. Appel and Malečkar 2012; Grayson 1997). In particular, Shankar et al. (2001) clearly state that "narratives are stories" (p. 429). However, in a hermeneutic analysis of consumer stories, Thompson (1997) found

data that suggests that a narrative is derived from “a process of attribution of meaning to and interpretation of a story” (p. 6), though he himself still used the terms interchangeably (Laer et al. 2014). It is through this argument, that Laer et al. (2014) argue that the terms should be separated between the storyteller (for story) and the story-receiver (for narrative), to distinguish between the producer and consumer of the text in question.

Now that this distinction has been made, the term narrative can be further demarcated. To start, Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines narrative as “A way of presenting or understanding a situation or series of events that reflects and promotes a particular point of view or set of values”. However, one of the first to write on the subject seems to disagree; according to Bruner (1990), a definition for narrative must address two elements. The first element is chronology: A narrative has a beginning, a middle and an end. The second element is causality: The events in the story must logically follow one another. Squire (2012) agrees with these elements, but they say this temporal element ‘chronology’ is not as important. Instead, they add another element: There must be a recognisable social, cultural or historical significance. As they state:

“A number series is a progression of signs, but its primary meaning is mathematical and does not lie in social, cultural or historical realms. A corollary of this definition is that stories do not have universal currency; they draw on and work within particular social, cultural and historical symbolic resources. The ‘reading’ of stories may therefore shift or break down between distinct social, cultural and historical worlds.” (p. 1)

Ryan (2003) brings a similar perspective to the table. They explain that the definition of narrative is built up by constructs that are very dependent on field of study - such as the way in which a narrative can be provided. They argue that it is therefore not possible for a precise definition to be formulated, as there will always be some way to disprove the notion. Rudrum (2006) has a direct response to this, stating that - like St. Augustine’s musings on the definition of ‘time’ in his *Confessions* - the definition of narrative is self-evident until it is requested:

“Mutatis mutandis, we all know what a narrative is: we all recognise one when we see one. But when we try to commit our knowledge to paper, it inevitably turns out that for every generalization there is an exception, for every taxonomy there is a misfit, and for every definition there is always room for further definition, as extraneous elements creep into our classifications. Such, no doubt, is life.” (p. 1)

It seems there is a myriad of perspectives on the matter. Not only is there discourse on the definition of narrative, there also seems to be discourse around whether one can and, indeed, should exist at all. However, since this research cannot continue without a working definition of narrative, the Merriam-Webster definition will be used. This definition includes parts of the philosophy of Bruner and Squire, since the elements of chronology and causality are implied through the first part of the definition: “A way of presenting or understanding a situation or series of events...” and the second part of the definition includes a recognisable social, cultural or historical significance: “...that reflects and promotes a particular point of view or set of values”. Moreover, it incorporates the main criticism from Ryan as the definition claims that a narrative is “A way of presenting or understanding...”. For the scope of this research, it is therefore decided that the Merriam-Webster definition will be the working definition for this research.

Demarcation of narrative transportation

Before the term narrative transportation was coined, Deighton et al. (1989) described an interesting effect of stories; the audience of a story seemed to lose themselves in the narrative as a result of an invitation to join in the action the story portrays. Richard Gerrig described this feeling in his book called *Experiencing Narrative Worlds* from 1993. He compares narrative transportation to physically travelling somewhere. Upon return, the experience leaves the audience somewhat transformed. This comparison was later used in an article by Green and Brock (2000), who described narrative transportation as immersion in a narrative world through a combination of feelings, imagery and attention. More recently, Green (2021) elaborated on the feeling of being transported, describing it as feeling ‘lost in a story’ and that it is often accompanied by time passing by unnoticed. However, narrative transportation can only happen when certain contextual and personal preconditions are met

(Green & Brock, 2002); the audience may experience narrative transportation when the story is engaging and the audience is open to be transported. Laer et al. (2014) elaborate on this notion, stating that narrative transportation occurs because of empathy for the characters in the narrative and because the audience is wondering what will happen next in the plot. This concept of empathy in relation to the narrative will be further explored in “the effect of narrative transportation - narrative transportation and emotional content” section of the introduction.

Though there have been minor adjustments and elaborations to the definition first introduced by Green and Brock in 2000, it is still the most commonly used and widely accepted definition of narrative transportation, and will therefore be used in this paper. This is also the definition used by Appel et al. (2015), the creators of the Transportation Scale - Short Form (TS-SF). In their article, Appel et al. show that the tool has been extensively tested and that it is almost as reliable and valid as the original Transportation Scale by Green and Brock (2000). This shows that, through this definition, narrative transportation is measurable. Therefore, narrative transportation will be regarded as “immersion in a narrative world through a combination of feelings, imagery and attention” for the scope of this paper.

The effects of narrative transportation

As previously discussed, a narrative can make one feel like they are a traveler, like they lose themselves momentarily and forget the existence of elements of their surroundings (Gerrig, 1993). Or, as Laer et al. (2014) describe it, “The state of narrative transportation makes the world of origin partially inaccessible to the story-receiver, thus marking a clear separation in terms of here/there and now/before, or narrative world/world of origin” (p. 10). According to Green (2008), when audiences lose themselves in a narrative like this, their intentions and attitudes come to reflect the narrative. Laer et al. (2019) explain that this is exactly the reason why stories have such a profound persuasive effect on the audience. They say that the effect of narrative transportation manifests itself in the audience’s intentions, attitudes, beliefs and cognitive and affective responses, the latter of which was also theorised by Bal and Veltkamp (2013).

Regardless of the way in which the persuasive effect is produced, the effect is very powerful. Take for instance the commercial block during the Super Bowl. Marketers are willing to spend small

fortunes (in 2015 it was 7 million dollars on average according to Hanlon, 2024) to have their ads played during this commercial block. A qualitative analysis was conducted by Brechman and Purvis (2015) to test what makes some Super Bowl ads effective, while others seem to be a waste of money. They found that around half of the ads conducted a narrative approach, and that these were - on average - significantly more popular with the audience. Many more studies have been conducted on the profitability of the persuasive effect of narrative transportation (e.g. Cao et al., 2021; MacFerran et al., 2010). This shows that the narrative transportation has a strong persuasive effect on audiences.

Narrative transportation and emotional content

Besides the persuasive effect of narrative transportation, research has also shown that narrative transportation can amplify (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Walkington et al., 2020) and even evoke (Alameda, 2020; Walkington et al., 2020) empathic responses when there was previously a negative affect. As Bal and Veltkamp explain, stories evoke and amplify an audience's empathic skills only when they are transported. Here, they refer to a study by Mar et al. (2009) which explored the link between reading fiction and empathy with narrative transportation as a mediating factor. They argue that there is a strong link between reading fiction and empathic skills because fiction simulates real-world problems, and therefore has a real consequence on the reader. The audience then learns about the real world and how they should interact with other people. Before working on the article in 2009, one of the authors, Oatley (1999), had already written about this effect in an article called 'Why Fiction May be Twice as True as Fact: Fiction as Cognitive and Emotional Simulation'. He states that readers of fiction share the experiences of the characters in the narrative. And, since this narrative is a simulation of real-world problems, the readers experience real problems. He concludes that this is how readers practice their empathic skills while reading fiction. Mar et al. (2009) continue with this line of reasoning, saying that readers also practice their empathic skills because they try to predict what the characters might do, feel or think. This can be done most effectively when the reader tries to look at the situation from the perspective of the individual characters; when the reader is sympathising. This line of reasoning - where narrative transportation is the key mediating factor that determines whether the reader learns empathic skills through reading fiction - is backed up and continued by many more authors (e.g. Djikic et al., 2009; Pelowski & Akiba, 2011; Rapp et al., 2001;

Shuman, 2006). This shows that narrative transportation can play an important role in the evocation and amplification of empathy in the audience.

Conditions for narrative transportation

There are certain factors that make it easier to become transported in a narrative. According to Green and Brock (2000), a narrative needs to have emotional content to be compelling enough to transport the reader. Like emotional content, there are other factors that determine the transportive ability of a story. The two most limiting factors seem to be media type (Green & Brock, 2002) and the length of the story (Brechman & Purvis, 2015).

Media type

In their definition, Green and Brock refer to a narrative world. They state that the narrative world may be a book, a movie, a game or even an advertisement, so long as it contains a story (Green & Brock, 2000, 2002). Though, there are individual differences that make some preferred media more efficient in transporting than others (Green, 2021). For example, Green et al. argued in 2008 that those who prefer not to exert cognitive effort may be more transported in video-form narratives, while those who enjoy putting in cognitive effort may be more transported in text-form narratives. Regardless, it has been shown that narrative transportation can occur through different narrative worlds, which is a useful piece of information when designing experiments around narrative transportation.

Length of the narrative

Similarly, the length of the narrative is also important, but it is not prepotent. Research has shown that longer narratives allow for deeper audience immersion, which is positively correlated with narrative transportation (Brechman & Purvis, 2015). However, while longer narratives may allow for deeper audience immersion, research indicates that even brief and straightforward stories - like mini-films or one-page advertisements - can be transporting (Chen, 2014; Escalas, 2004, respectively). These shorter stories seem to borrow their narrative load from popular tropes like ‘the power of love’ to tell profound stories in an efficient manner (Green, 2021). Indeed, sometimes the stories *need* to be short, because the medium does not allow for longer form content.

Again, this becomes obvious through the example of the Super Bowl. When a 30-second advertisement costs 7 million dollars to air (Hanlon, 2024), advertisers have a great incentive to share

their message as concisely as possible. Brechman and Purvis (2015) found that the best ads make use of popular tropes to tell a deeper story than what would otherwise be expected in such a short time. This shows that narrative transportation can occur even with short-form narratives.

A broader overview of research on narrative transportation

While narrative transportation was initially researched to understand more about how stories engage their audience for entertainment purposes like novels (e.g. Gerrig, 1993), films (e.g. Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017) or TV shows (e.g. Pittman & Steiner, 2019), the focus seems to have shifted more to how narrative transportation can be utilised as a persuasive mechanism in the field of marketing and advertisement (van Laer et al., 2014). In a recent literature review of 95 peer-reviewed articles, Thomas and Grigsby (2024) showed that marketers have become more and more adept in engaging consumers with their stories through narrative transportation. Besides the field of marketing and entertainment, narrative transportation has also been explored in the fields of psychology (Nielsen et al., 2018), communications (Oh et al., 2020) and healthcare (Andrews et al., 2022). In all these fields, narrative transportation is being used to engage audiences and to teach lessons. Therefore, researching the effect that stories can have on us is an important endeavor.

The present study

Though narrative transportation seems to have been extensively researched, Thomas and Grigsby (2024) argue that there are still some areas to be explored where narrative transportation could have a significant impact. One such area is one where the audience will actively participate, in the case of this study that would be through the writing of condolence letters. Currently, no research has been done on the relationship between the amount of words participants write and their level of transportation in a narrative. When the audience feels transported in a narrative, will they write more or less words?

To answer this question, the story needs to allow for a great amount of transportation. It is believed that a narrative that reflects the real world in some way, might be more transportive (Mar et al., 2009), though no research has been done on the link between reflectiveness of a narrative to the real world and the amount of words written about the scenario. For this study, therefore, it was decided to use a narrative that reflects a real event from World War II. While there is no research on

the subject, it is expected that word count and level of transportation are positively correlated.

Therefore, the first hypothesis will be *H1: Participants who score higher on the Transportation Scale – Short Form write more words in condolence letters written from the perspective of the commanding officer to the family of deceased soldiers.*

There is also no literature on the relationship between the writing of emotional content and the level of narrative transportation in a narrative. However, it is expected by the researcher that the amount of emotional content and the level of narrative transportation are positively correlated. This is because literature *has* shown that emotional content is one of the conditions of narrative transportation (Green and Brock, 2000) and narrative transportation has a positive effect on empathic responses (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). Therefore, the second hypothesis will be *H2: Participants who score higher on the Transportation Scale – Short Form write more emotional content in condolence letters written from the perspective of the commanding officer to the family of deceased soldiers.*

Methods

Before we started collecting data, the experiment was granted approval by the University of Twente's BMS ethics committee. The University of Twente's ethics procedure number is 240203. We chose to use the method of convenience sampling, as no other approach was deemed realistically in line with the goal of getting enough participants to be able to extrapolate lessons about how the writing of condolence letters is influenced by the level of narrative transportation in the corresponding story.

Participants

There were three ways in which we reached out to participants. The first way was by asking family and friends to participate. The second way was by contacting other researchers looking for participants; an understanding was established that we would participate in each other's study. The third way we found participants was by hanging up posters around the University of Twente advertising our study (see Appendix A). There were no requirements for taking part in the study, other than being above 18 years old. The participant had the choice to sign up via the University of Twente's BMS faculty Sona-system test subject pool to earn 0.5 credits upon completion of the study.

Materials

The two variables that were relevant to this survey were trait empathy and level of narrative transportation. The questionnaires used were the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) for the trait empathy and the Transportation Scale - Short Form (TS-SF) for the level of narrative transportation. Moreover, a video with voice-over was created to set the scene of the participant being a commanding officer in World War II, who lost two soldiers under their command and has to write a condolence letter to each of the families of the deceased.

The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ)¹

To be able to assess participants' levels of trait empathy, the survey made use of a self-report measurement created by Spreng et al. (2009) called The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ). This questionnaire contains a total of 16 statements of which eight statements are positively worded, for example "I enjoy making other people feel better" and "It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully". The other eight statements are reverse coded, for example "Other people's misfortunes do not disturb me a great deal" and "I remain unaffected when someone close to me is happy". Participants are asked to indicate how much they agree with each statement using a 0-4 Likert scale with answers ranging from "Never (0)" to "Always (4)". A participant's final score on the TEQ is derived by summing the scores of each individual statement. Therefore, the higher the score of a given participant on the TEQ, the higher the level of trait empathy of this participant.

The Transportation Scale - Short Form (TS-SF)

To test the participants' level of narrative transportation, the Transportation Scale - Short Form (TS-SF) by Appel et al., (2015) was included in the survey. It includes six statements on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Examples of statements from this questionnaire are: "The narrative affected me emotionally." and "I could picture myself in the scene of the events

¹ This questionnaire was part of the study the participants had to complete, as this study was done in conjunction with another student working on her thesis. The results of this questionnaire will not be used as this is beyond the scope of this paper.

described in the narrative”. None of the six statements in the questionnaire are reverse coded. There are two subscales, Character (relating to questions about the characters in the story) and Story (relating more to the story itself). A participant’s final score is determined by summing the score of each statement. Therefore, the higher the score of a participant on the (TS-SF), the higher the level of narrative transportation of the participant.

The video

There were two videos recorded. The videos were created by recording a voice over during a slide show. The only difference between these videos was the narrator. As the two narrators had very distinct voices, it was attempted to exclude the possibility that the results would be influenced by the voice of the narrator. To this end, one narrator would voice the first half of the story and the other narrator would voice the second half of the story. The reverse is true for the other video. The transcript for the voice over can be found in Appendix B. Furthermore, the slide show can be found in Appendix C.

Procedure

An information letter and consent form preceded the survey’s three demographic questions about age, gender, and nationality. Hereafter, the questions from the TEQ were asked. Then, general knowledge and interest in the subject was asked, and the participants were asked to watch a video (see Appendix B and C) explaining the scenario and the characters they were to write a condolence letter about. Here, the participant was shown one of two possible videos. After being shown a video, the participant was asked whether the video was watched in its entirety. Hereafter, the items from the TS-SF were presented. Next, the participants were asked to write the condolence letter for the first deceased soldier. Within this assignment was a link embedded to the same video the respondents had seen before, to serve as a reminder what the context of the soldier’s passing was. Upon completion, the participants were asked if they had any final remarks on the soldier or the letter. Then, they were asked to do the second writing assignment. Again, they were asked for any final remarks on the soldier or the letter. To end the study, the respondents had to enter their interest and knowledge in WWII. They were then asked if there were any final remarks and the respondents were assured that all

their answers would be kept confidential.

Data analysis

After the data collection, the participants who did not meet three conditions were removed from the analysis. The participant must give full consent, the participant must have completed the survey and the participant must have answered the question whether the video was watched in its entirety with 'yes'. After cleaning the dataset, the letters were coded according to the codebook, which will be further explained in the *coding* section below.

After coding, the words per letter were calculated. Then, the descriptive statistics were calculated for the Transportation Scale - Short Form, its subscales Character (items 1 through 4) and Story (items 5 and 6) and the items individually. This included the means, which were then used to check if the demographic statistics - age, gender and nationality - and other questions from the questionnaire - knowledge and interest in World War 2 - were correlated with the mean scores on the Transportation Scale - Short Form. Hereafter, the scores of the TS-SF scales were used in a correlational analysis with the amount of words per letter. Next, a correlational analysis was conducted between the scores on the TS-SF scales and the code theme 'solace' (made up of the codes 'Supportive action or promise', 'Perspective taking' and 'Expressions of grieving'). Finally, the letters were compared to real condolence letters from WWII, to see how representative the letters are of real condolence letters.

Coding

To create the best themes and codes to describe the patterns in the letters, the coding process incorporated both inductive and deductive methods. First, the two researchers coded 10 letters each, and discussed their findings to create a preliminary codebook. Then, this codebook was used to code 3 more letters by both researchers together. Hereafter, the codebook was discussed with a supervisor, and it was adjusted and used once more after the researchers had coded another 15 letters separately. Then, all the letters were coded according to the newest codebook by each of the researchers, whereafter they came together to discuss their findings and go over each letter, coding the letters again based on the combination of their separate codings. This process led to a codebook that was

then adjusted based on feedback by peers, that was then used by the researchers to each code one half of the letters separately. This final codebook with the frequencies can be found in Appendix D. Finally, the researchers checked the half of the letters that the other had coded, and after discussing some minor adjustments the coding process had finished.

Results

Participants

A total of 89 responses were recorded for the survey, with 43 responses excluded based on criteria outlined in the "Methods - Data Analysis" section. After excluding these participants, a dataset comprising 46 respondents remained.

Within this dataset, there were 19 male and 27 female participants. The mean age of the respondents was 23.9 years, with a median age of 23 years. Ages ranged from 19 to 59 years. The majority of participants were of Dutch nationality (22), followed by German (16). Other nationalities represented included American (3), Romanian (1), Canadian (1), Belgian (1), Danish (1) and Polish (1).

Participants reported varying levels of interest in the topic of World War II on a 10-point slider before the study, with results ranging from 2 to 10 with a mean of 6.74 and with a median of 7. When asked to rate their knowledge of World War II events on another 10-point slider, responses ranged from 1 to 10, with a mean of 5.80 and a median of 6. After the study, when participants were again asked to report their interest and knowledge in the topic, the results for interest ranged from 2 to 10 with a mean of 6.76 and a median of 7. The results for the knowledge of World War II after the study had a range of 1 to 9 with a mean of 5.87 and a median of 6.

Transportation Scale - Short Form

Responses to the individual items in the Transportation Scale – Short Form were mostly similar. The means of the subscale Story have a smaller range than the means of the subscale Character. This can be explained by the fact that there are 4 items in the subscale Story as opposed to the subscale Character, which has two. This entails that there are more responses within the subscale Story, and the means are less spread out as a result. The mean, modus, standard deviation and median

of the items and the subscales and questionnaire as a whole can be found in Table 1 below. The Cronbach's alpha is considered good for both subscales and the questionnaire as a whole.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Medians and Cronbach's Alpha of Items, Subscales and All Items

(N=46)

Items and subscales	Mean	SD	Median	Modus	Cronbach's Alpha
Item 1 (Story)	4.72	1.11	5	5	
Item 2 (Story)	5.07	1.14	5	5	
Item 3 (Story)	5.17	1.40	5	5	
Item 4 (Story)	4.28	1.41	5	5	
Item 5 (Character)	4.41	1.47	5	5	
Item 6 (Character)	4.76	1.52	5	6	
Story subscale	4.81	.98	4.88	5	0.78
Character subscale	4.59	1.43	5	5	0.91
All items	4.74	.99	4.83	5	0.83

Furthermore, the demographic variables age, gender, and nationality as well as total reported interest and knowledge about WWII were tested for correlation with the mean score of narrative transportation. However, no significant effects could be found. The correlation scores with their respective p-value can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Correlation between demographic variables and overall transportation scores and the associated p-values (N=46)

Variable	Correlation score	p-value
Age	-.16	.29
Gender	.04	.77
Nationality	.06	.70
Knowledge about WWII	.07	.82
Interest about WWII	.2	.64

The word count of the letters

The amount of words written per letter varied greatly between participants, ranging between 33 and 334. The mean of the amount of words is 108.08. There was no significant correlation found between the amount of words written and the score on the Transportation Scale - Short Form, $r(46) = .13, p = .39$. Furthermore, both Story and Character subscales show non-significant correlations with the amount of words, $r(46) = .09, p = .57$ and $r(46) = .15, p = .33$ respectively. Therefore, the first hypothesis, *H1: Participants who score higher on the Transportation Scale – Short Form write more words in condolence letters written from the perspective of the commanding officer to the family of deceased soldiers*, is rejected.

The emotional content of the letters

To answer the second hypothesis, *H2: Participants who score higher on the Transportation Scale – Short Form write more emotional content in condolence letters written from the perspective of the commanding officer to the family of deceased soldiers*, a correlational analysis was done between the score of the TS-SF and the participants use of the codes in the theme ‘Solace’. For all codes, the explanation and frequency - together with a coded example - can be found in the codebook in Appendix D. The codes in the theme ‘Solace’ are ‘Supportive action or promise’, ‘Perspective taking’ and ‘Expressions of grieving’. It was found that there is no significant effect for the correlation between the score on the TS-SF and the amount of times the theme ‘Solace’ was coded, $r(46) = .02, p = .92$. Therefore, the second hypothesis is rejected.

Broader analysis of the letters

To further answer the research question ‘*To what extent does the level of narrative transportation influence the emotional content or the extent of the written letters?*’, a broader correlational analysis of the themes was conducted. The only significant effect found, was between the subscale Character and the theme Team-dynamics, $r(46) = .30, p = .049$. The correlations of the scores on the TS-SF subscales and the four themes can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Correlations and their respective p-values for the TS-SF subscales and the questionnaire as a whole and the amount of times the code themes were present in the letters (N=46)

TS-SF Scales	Solace		Soldier Characteristics		Formalities		Team-dynamics	
	<i>r</i>	p-value	<i>r</i>	p-value	<i>r</i>	p-value	<i>r</i>	p-value
Story	-.7	.65	-.01	.92	-.13	.40	-.08	.60
Character	.13	.41	.20	.18	-.23	.13	.30	<.05*
Total	.02	.92	.09	.56	-.20	.19	.09	.56

* .049

Tone and structure of the letters

The tone of the letters overall was very similar. The letters were often serious but empathic, with most letters following a certain pattern; First, the family was addressed with the word ‘Dear’, which was followed by grievances and the message that their son and brother had died; “*It is with incredible pain that I have to inform you of the death of your son and brother John Miller.*”. Then, some details surrounding the death would be shared; “*He was killed during an attack as he had made himself a target by helping his fellow soldiers by yelling out enemy positions.*”. Hereafter, the deceased soldier was often put in a good light: “*...he left a great impact as a respectable man.*”. This was followed by final condolences and the ending of the letter: “*Please take care of yourself and think of all the good memories you have of your son and brother John. My condolences. Warm regards, ... Commanding Officer of the 28th regiments, 4th squad.*”.

Many letters followed this pattern, or they used a structure that differed only slightly. The letters that did not follow this structure were all still serious in tone, but they lacked emotional substance. These were shorter letters that addressed the family, stated the death of the soldier and provided condolences with their regards to end the letter. This general format and the implications will be further debated in the discussion section.

The survey letters and actual condolence letters

To see how representative our letters are of real letters in a World War II scenario, a comparison was done between the survey letters and 3 actual condolence letters from World War 2 (see Appendix E for the real condolence letters). In terms of word count, these letters fall within the range of words found in the survey letters (word count: 50, 79 and 157 versus survey letters with a range of 33 to 334). Moreover, the same pattern in tone and letter structure was mostly present in the three real letters as in the study letters; first, the reader was addressed with ‘Dear’. Then, the passing away of the son was mentioned and sympathies were expressed, which was followed by an attempt to put the son in a good light. Here, a difference arises. In the letters, the circumstances of the death were not mentioned, while they were often present in the study letters. This will be further discussed in the discussion section.

Besides similarities in word count, tone and letter structure, there were also similarities in the choice of words and sentence structures. In one of the real letters the writer ends their note with ‘His service to this country was characterized by his devotion to his duty, and in his death we have lost a gallant comrade-in-arms.’ (From *Typed and Signed Letter of Condolence*, by Douglas MacArthur, 1945, <https://bitly.cx/aMkvJ>). This is a statement that contains themes of honouring the soldier and it talks about how devoted the soldier was to the cause. In that sense, this message resembles sentences from the survey letters like ‘...Harry served the call of his country admirably and in passing he was in the company of comrades...’ and ‘The passing of John is a great loss to us, as we have lost a good friend and a great loss to our country, as we lost one of the most loyal soldiers.’.

Another illustration of the similarity in themes is found in the opening of the letters. Here are two instances in the real condolence letters: ‘Dear Ms. Duke: It is with regret that I am writing to confirm the recent telegram informing you of the death of your husband...’ (From *A Letter Informs a Military Spouse of Her Husband’s Death During WWII*, J. A. Ulio, 1944, <https://bitly.cx/KavMP>), and ‘Dear Mrs. Larriviere: I have just read with deep sorrow of the loss of your son, Sidney.’ (From *Letter from Southwestern Louisiana Institute*, by Joel Fletcher, 1941, <https://bitly.cx/pCKp>). This is comparable to the way many survey letters started, for instance: ‘Dear Mrs. Miller, It is with my deepest sympathies that I write to inform you of the death of your son.’, and ‘Dear Mrs. Miller, I regret to inform you that your son and brother John Miller, was shot and killed during a push to break the enemy lines.’. The similarities here are the way the reader is addressed (‘Dear’) and the way in which sympathies or condolences are shared.

The key difference that can be found between the survey letters and the real letters is the amount of information present. In the survey letters, the information that was provided to the participant (e.g. “John was liked by the group and was known for sharing his rations.”) was reflected in the letter that was written, sometimes even verbatim. Excluding condolences and other such strictly emotional content, no further information was presented in the real letters than informing the reader that the soldier had passed away. There is no mention of the particular battle or the way in which the soldier passed away, etc. This will be further discussed in the discussion section.

Though this difference is important, it is still reasonable to say that the letters from the survey are comparable to real condolence letters on the merit of the similarities in structure and tone.

Discussion

This study was conducted to investigate the effect that narrative transportation has on the emotional content and amount of words written in condolence letters. To this end, this study assessed the correlations between the scores on the Transportation Scale – Short Form and its subscales to the word count and the emotional content of condolence letters written in a fictional scenario depicting an event from World War 2. These correlations turned out to be non-significant, and the respective hypotheses *H1: Participants who score higher on the Transportation Scale – Short Form write more words in condolence letters written from the perspective of the commanding officer to the family of deceased soldiers* and *H2: Participants who score higher on the Transportation Scale – Short Form write more emotional content in condolence letters written from the perspective of the commanding officer to the family of deceased soldiers* were both rejected.

Does transportation influence the amount of words written?

For the first hypothesis - the hypothesis relating to word count – it is important to note that many letters followed the same structure; First, the family was addressed. Then, grievances were expressed and the message was written that the soldier had died. Then, some details surrounding the death would be shared. Hereafter, the deceased soldier was often put in a good light. This was followed by final condolences and the ending of the letter. Sometimes, however, the letters were written without the section where the soldier was put in a good light. These letters that did not follow this structure were all still serious in tone, but they lacked emotional substance. These were shorter letters that addressed the family, stated the death of the soldier and provided condolences with their regards, thereby ending the letter. One participant explained their reasoning why they kept their letter serious and unexpressive;

“Firstly, I deliberately did not reveal anything about the specific circumstances surrounding his death or the regiment in which he served, since that is potentially sensitive information that can't be shared or written down to be sent in times of war. Secondly, I only addressed one person and not the sister in this case, because I think such a letter should go to the wife first and because I don't know how old the sister is. I deliberately still addressed

her with Mrs. instead of Ms. to avoid being condescending regarding her marriage status. Lastly, I have to imagine that there's not much useful to say after the initial revelation, so I kept it short and relatively surface-level, also because I feel like the leader of a regiment wouldn't really know this person (especially given his personal) information above, so coming up with a story about how much I liked him would have certainly come across as empty and insincere”

This reasoning shows that it is the case that every written letter that is short is not necessarily short because the writer did not care about the assignment or the soldier and their family. Indeed, this letter was short precisely *because* they cared. It seems some participants who scored high on the transportation scale – who were very much transported in the narrative - wrote short letters. This is a sentiment that reflects conversations I had with participants after the study was concluded; letters were often kept short and precise because the participant felt that this would make the letter more realistic. Sometimes, they would not want to share sensitive information that might be exploited by the enemy if the letter were to be intercepted. Other times, they felt it would be insincere to talk about the deceased, as they had not really known him. This same participant from the previous comment puts it very eloquently;

“I kept this letter in a similar style as the one before, but because the regiment leader knew John better (presumably), and because there is more relieving information to disclose regarding the circumstances of his death. Instead of the sentence I put out about greatness, I feel like in real life I would have included an actually meaningful and more specific anecdote about our time serving together, but I couldn't think of something right now. Other than that, the letter is similar because I feel like a regiment leader would have to write a lot of these and needs to desensitise themselves for this kind of stuff to a certain extent”.

Besides the comment about the differences between the soldiers, which is beyond the scope of this research, the participant states that they feel that a commanding officer would have to

desensitise themselves to be able to do their job properly, thereby keeping the letter short and precise. Another participant seems to agree with this sentiment:

“I tried to make it a bit more personal, as the family has not seen their son/brother in 2 years. Therefore, I found it important to write a more detailed and emotional letter. I do think tho, that during WW2 the generals probably did not have the time to write that kind of emotional, long letters”.

These comments show that in some cases, the participants think that their letters need to be somewhat brief to make them feel more realistic. This could explain why no significant effect was found. Either way, further research on how narrative transportation affects the length of written letters should be done to more fully understand this effect.

Does transportation influence the amount of emotional content written?

This last participant did not only speak about the length of their letter. They also wrote about limiting the emotional content of the letter to make it more realistic. This could provide insight as to why the results were non-significant.

One explanation for this phenomenon is that in creating a story that drives up engagement, some story elements were added that may have impacted the results. In the story, the following was mentioned. *“Next to your cup of coffee is a pile of documents, seemingly getting higher every time you blink. On top of this pile of responsibilities is a report ... it states that two of the soldiers in your unit have been identified among the deceased.”*. The way this story flows, it is implied that you – the commanding officer - might be getting overwhelmed by the work, which plays into this idea of the participant that there is a need to desensitise. This shows that the story is a confounding variable that should be taken more into account when conducting this type of research. Perhaps future research can even be performed around a ‘story variable’, where the effect of a more detailed versus a less detailed story on word count and emotional content of written condolence letters is explored.

Another explanation for why participants may have felt the need to limit the amount of emotional content in their letters is because it might simply be *true* that the letters from commanding

officers gradually lose their emotional content. When a commanding officer has to write multiple condolence letters, time after time, it seems reasonable to think that the last letter may not be as detailed or well thought out as the first. This is an area that can be explored with further research, through an analysis of real condolence letters.

The character subscale and team-dynamics theme

The one significant result in this study was found in the correlation between the character subscale of the Transportation Scale – Short Form and the ‘Team-dynamics’ coding theme. This result can be found in the broader analysis in Table 3. The theme is made up of the codes ‘Companionability of the soldier’, ‘Solitariness of the soldier’, ‘Authority of the writer’, ‘Honourable mention from the unit’ and ‘Honourable mention from the commander’. These are codes that say something about the socio-hierarchical position of the soldier. The correlation is .3, which is a weak positive correlation. The observed effect is that participants who form clear images of the soldiers more often mention said soldiers’ positions in their respective social hierarchies. Conversely, participants who form less clear images of the soldiers, mention the respective socio-hierarchical positions less. This correlation might indeed be meaningful. However, there is also some merit to the idea that - with all the correlational analyses that have been done for this study - it would not be unheard of to find one unexplainable weak correlation that boasts a p-value lower than .05. This correlation might simply be produced by happenstance. As the famous statistical saying goes; if you torture data long enough it will confess to anything. In either case, future research should be dedicated to finding out if there is a correlation between image-forming of characters in a narrative and mentioning said characters’ socio-hierarchical position.

Strengths and limitations

A strength of this study is the video that was used to transport the audience. On average, the level of narrative transportation was rather high for a two-minute long medium (see: van Laer et al., 2014). Furthermore, it can be concluded that the narrative was rather reflective of the real world, as the resulting letters were remarkably similar to real examples of condolence letters from WWII.

Another strength of this study is the inter-coder agreement. It is a good alpha (.75), and this was achieved through a lot of work by the coders and much help from third parties and experts. The resulting dataset is open for use, and it may be utilised in the future for more research on the subject.

A limitation of this study is that the sample was mostly students found through the convenience sampling method. It is also a small sample, with only 46 usable participants. This means that the generalisability of the study is in question. Furthermore, the participants were told that they were a commanding officer. They were not told a name. Many comments in the study were about how it was difficult to write the letter because they were unsure how to sign it, or who's perspective to write from. This uncertainty was found in the way some participants jokingly signed off on their letters; "*Sincerely, the army guy*", "*My condolences, Piet Piraat*" etc. Other participants signed off with "*Sincerely, his commanding officer*", or just "*Sincerely, X*". Because of the frequency with which this part of the letter was referred to as being confusing, and the broader implication that participants were unsure from which perspective to write, this is a limitation of the study.

Lastly, the study was not conducted in a controlled environment. Some participants were recorded to have used more time than would be reasonably expected between the start and end time of the study, which could have led to a discrepancy between the answers they filled in for the transportation scale and their actual narrative transportation levels. This also could have had an impact on their concentration levels throughout the study. Furthermore, participants could have searched the internet for examples of condolence letters or asked a program like ChatGPT to generate a condolence letter. These are limitations to consider when interpreting our results as they could have a significant impact on our understanding of the subject.

Conclusion

In conclusion, narrative transportation is an important construct in many fields. Therefore, it is important to understand more about the effects of being transported. In this study, it was found that there is no significant effect between narrative transportation in a World War 2 narrative and the emotional content or extent of condolence letters written. However, the letters from the study did accurately reflect real examples of condolence letters during World War 2, both in length and content

matter. Lastly, some interesting research topics were pointed out for future research.

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Appendix A


Poster that was spread around the campus of Twente University to gather participants

**ONLINE SURVEY
WORLD WAR II**

**0.5
SONA
CREDITS**

YOUR HELP IS NEEDED!
WE ARE COLLECTING DATA FOR OUR
BACHELOR THESIS AND INVITE YOU TO
PARTICIPATE IN OUR SURVEY! YOU WILL
DIVE INTO WW2 AND WRITE TWO SHORT
LETTERS TO THE FAMILIES OF SOLDIERS.
INTERESTED? THEN SIGN-UP NOW!

 APPROXIMATELY 20-30 MINUTES.



**DISCLAIMER: THIS STUDY DISCUSSES SUBJECTS
SURROUNDING WAR AND DEATH!**

SIGN-UP THROUGH SONA:
[HTTPS://UTWENTE.SONA-SYSTEMS.COM/DEFAULT.ASPX?P_RETURN_EXPERIMENT_ID=2828](https://utwente.sona-systems.com/default.aspx?p_return_experiment_id=2828)

Appendix B

Script used for the recording

It is 1944. You, a commanding officer of the allied forces, are stationed in the mountains of the Ardennes on a frosty winter night. You are sleeping in a cramped, cold tent, away from the soldiers under your responsibility. You can't find the comfort of sleep, for gusts of wind are slamming into the side of the tent. This sound reminds you of the skirmishes in the past that you and your unit have survived through. Eventually, you manage to fall into a restless slumber. Then, at 05:30, you jolt awake as 2000 German cannons fire upon your location. The chaos that ensued is unlike anything you have experienced before; the screams of your comrades were only interrupted by the impact of cannon fire, drowning out all sense of reality. The eastern front is under attack. You are under attack (Short moment of silence + Switch narrator).

In the heart of the Ardennes, the German forces slowly advanced. The first light of day exposed the gray-clad soldiers, tanks rumbling through the woods, and the muffled sounds of boots on snow. The Ardennes, once a serene haven, now bore witness to an unexpected confrontation. As the German offensive collided with the unprepared Allied lines, the silence shattered into a cacophony of gunfire and distant echoes. The cold air carried the tension of the impending struggle. In the quiet chaos, men grappled with the harsh reality of war. In the heart of this wintry battleground, the horrors of war manifested in the cries of the wounded, the haunting wails of distant artillery, and the silent prayers for a reprieve that seemed elusive. This battle became known as the battle of the bulge (Switch narrator).

Today marks the 20th day after the initial attack. You are sitting in your tent, a safe mile away from the front lines. There is a brief reprieve in the action, as a morbid silence fills the air. A cup of steaming hot coffee sits on the side of your desk while a harsh wind blows through the cracks of your tent. Next to your cup of coffee is a pile of documents, seemingly getting higher every time you blink. On top of this pile of responsibilities is a report that you recently received from the mortuary affairs officer. It states that two of the soldiers in your unit have been identified among the deceased. As you

were the commanding officer, it is your responsibility to write a condolence letter to the families of both soldiers informing them of the passing of their loved one.

Soldier 1:

John Miller of the 28th regiment, 4th squad, has been killed in action. He was shot and killed during a push to break the enemy frontlines. According to witness accounts, he protected his fellows by spotting and yelling out the enemy position, which made him a target. John was liked by the group and was known for sharing his rations. John had been under your command for over 2 years, surviving multiple battles within the squad. The identifiable remains and personal belongings that can be sent back to the family are John's body, his watch, wallet, and a pendant containing a photo of his loved ones. The only direct living relatives of John are his parents and sister.

Soldier 2:

Harry Taylor of the 28th regiment, 4th squad, has been killed in action. The death has been concluded to be the result from major head trauma that was caused by flying debris from one of the first initial explosions. Harry had only recently joined the unit and had been a member for about a month. He struggled to fit into the group and rather preferred to hang out by himself. The identifiable remains and personal belongings that can be sent back to the family are Harry's body, his watch, and his wallet, including its contents. The only direct living relatives of Harry are his parents and sister.

Appendix C

Example slides from the slide show. The full slideshow used for the video contains 16 images



Appendix D

The codebook

Theme	Code group	Code	Quotation	Frequencies
Solace		<p>Supportive action or promise: Phrases that indicate offering a form of help to aid in the grieving process of the family of the deceased soldier by performing some type of action.</p>	<p><i>“Additionally, a final salute will be offered as soon as possible”.</i></p>	104

Writer's compassion

Perspective taking: Expressions that aim to convey that the writer understands the feelings the family of the deceased soldier experiences and/or attempts to console them.	<i>"Missing a son and brother must be a deep pain only parents and a sister can feel"</i> .	213
Expressions of grieving: Expressions that show the intense sadness of the writer and/or unit regarding the death of the soldier.	<i>"He was an important part of our team, we are all grieving him"</i> .	122

Formalities**Details of death**

Death Statement: *"Your son, Harry, has passed away during the battle".* 93
Phrases that simply state that the soldier has passed away without giving any additional detail.

Gruesome details: *"He was shot and killed during a push to break the enemy frontlines".* 64
Phrases that present more detail about the exact way the soldier passed away.

Salutations

Addressing family: *"Concerning the family members of John Miller".* 6
Letters starting off specifically stating that the written letter is addressed to the family of one of the deceased soldiers.

Personal greetings:	<i>“Dear Mrs. and Mr. Taylor”.</i>	86
Letters starting off with a personal greeting to the family of one of the soldiers.		

Sign-off

Empathic sign-off:	<i>“May his honourable soul rest in peace Commanding officer Sir Siring”.</i>	48
Conclusions to a letter that have been embellished by adding additional detail that indicate a higher expression of emotionality.		
Regular sign-off:	<i>“Greetings ...”.</i>	23
Standard conclusions to a letter that have no additional detail to indicate higher emotionality.		

**Soldier
characteristics**

Devotion to the cause:	<i>“For 2 years he has served our country and allies loyally and died for this cause”.</i>	31
Expressions that show that the soldier was loyal to the cause.		
Ambitious work attitude:	<i>“Harry learned quickly and took his job seriously”.</i>	18
Expressions that show the soldier was committed to his job.		
Heroic action or description:	<i>“While we were attacked, he sacrificed himself to protect his squad”.</i>	51
Expressions of descriptions or actions undertaken by the deceased soldier that indicate behaviour that is considered admirable or brave.		

Team dynamics
Social identity

Companionability of the soldier: Expressions of mutual trust and loyalty, friendship or team bonding among the deceased soldier and other members of the unit.	<i>"Harry was a sweet guy who was always there for his companions".</i>	44
Solitariness of the soldier: Expressions that indicate the deceased soldier was often by himself.	<i>"I got to know him as a somewhat solitary person".</i>	10
Authority of the writer: Expressions that indicate that the writer of the letter is the commanding officer of the deceased soldier.	<i>"I am xx and the commanding officer of Harry".</i>	44

**Honouring the
soldier**

**Honourable
mention from the
unit:** *“His bravery and
dedication to the group
will always be
remembered and honored
and he will stay in our
hearts forever”.* 30

Expressions that aim
to convey great
respect and
recognition towards
the deceased soldier
from the point of
view of the unit.

**Honourable
mention from the
commander:** *“He was one of the very
best and most courageous
soldiers that I have had
the honour to lead”.* 116

Expressions that aim
to convey great
respect and
recognition towards
the deceased soldier
from the point of
view of the
commanding officer.

Appendix E

Real condolence letters from World War II

