

# A Study on the Strategies of Applying Labov's Narrative Analysis Model to the Plot Conception of the Continuation Tasks

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**Abstract:** Since the emergence of the continuation task, how to achieve efficient alignment between “reading” and “writing” has always been a crucial and challenging point in high school English teaching, and this task pays more attention to testing students' discourse analysis ability than before. Labov's narrative analysis model is distinctly instructive for students to read from the perspective of overall discourse analysis. It can not only answer the questions of “what to read” and “how to read” but also pave the way for “what to write” and “how to write” and point out the direction. Based on Labov's narrative analysis model, this paper takes the continuation task of volumes I and II of the new college entrance examination in 2022 as an example, expounds on how to predict the story trend further and conceive the story plot based on using the model to analyze the reading text. Finally, this paper puts forward some strategies that can benefit students' plot conception from the elements of complicating action, evaluation, and result.

**Keywords:** The Continuation Task, Labov's Narrative Analysis Model, Plot Conception

## 1. Introduction

Reading and writing have always been two necessary English language abilities. Many studies have shown that the combination of reading and writing can enhance students' understanding of reading content, and it is an effective method of learning promotion. Wang proposed “continuation” to promote foreign language learning and proved it to be effective in improving foreign language learning efficiency in subsequent studies.<sup>[1]</sup> On this basis, Zhejiang Province, as a pilot province of college entrance examination reform, took the lead in bringing the continuation task into the college entrance examination in 2016, and the focus of the examination was shifted from the previous language ability to the discourse understanding. The continuation task's genre is usually narrative, which mainly tells the experiences of characters or the changes of events, so it is closer to students' real lives than other genres. In addition, the continuation of the previous story can significantly stimulate students' imagination and creativity. However, many empirical studies have confirmed that students' performance in continuation tasks is not satisfactory in recent years. Some students do not know how to expand the content and describe the details. When finishing the task, students are required to continue writing based on several given paragraphs. Therefore, students need to fully understand the main background of the text, distinguish the known and unknown information in each story link, and sort out the connection between the plots.

Using Labov's narrative analysis model, students can define the narrative structure of the text, establish the context and language structure of the continuation text, and then complete the task of continuation. At the same time, this model is beneficial for teachers and students to grasp the propositional characteristics of the continuation task accurately, so it plays a vital guiding role in the teaching and learning of the continuation task.

## 2. The Labov's Narrative Analysis Model

In 1972, Labov, one of the representatives of American linguistics and sociolinguistics, provided a “fully developed” model of narrative structure. His analytical model has significantly impacted western narratology, and it is still the starting point for many scholars to discuss narrative genre analysis. Labov believed a complete narrative structure consists of six parts: abstract, orientation, complicating action,

evaluation, result, and coda. A full explanation of these elements is as follows.

“Abstract” is a summary of the story before telling it, and it can arouse readers’ interest in reading. The “orientation” is about “when and where did the story happen?” and “who participated in the story?” The narrator’s description of “orientation” lays the groundwork for the story’s beginning. “Complicating action” refers to the development of the events. It is the core part of the narrative structure, occupying most of the narrative text. This section usually consists of a series of statements or dialogues arranged chronologically. “Evaluation” permeates the entire text, referring to the author’s or characters’ views and attitudes towards events. It can create suspense, enhance readers’ interest, and enhance the story’s appeal. The “result” is the end of the story, including the fate of the characters and the achievement or failure of their goals. In addition, not all narratives have endings, or some endings are open. “Coda” serves as an inspiration for readers and is a bridge connecting the story with real life. Its function is to sublimate the theme. It is worth noting that not all narratives contain the above six elements, and missing one or two is very common.

### **3. The Case of the Model Used in Plot Conception of the Continuation Task**

Labov pointed out that a complete narrative begins with abstract and orientation, takes complicating action as the main body, sets off the atmosphere with evaluation, ends with the result, and finally isolates readers from the story with the coda.<sup>[2]</sup> The continuation task provides the opening words of two paragraphs as hints, so students need to use imagination and creativity to construct the plot, continue the complicating action of the story, and finally conclude with a reasonable result and coda. According to Labov’s narrative analysis model, the writing of the continuation task should focus on the complicating action, the evaluation, the result, and the coda. Taking the continuation task of volumes I and II of the new college entrance examination in 2022 as examples, this paper expounds how to flexibly use the model to deeply interpret the text, grasp the overall structure of the story, clarify the theme of the story, develop the author’s emotional attitude, and finally reasonably conceive the continuation content.

#### **3.1 Abstract**

Abstract usually appears at the beginning of the story. In addition, the title of the story can also be regarded as the abstract. If the abstract cannot be found at the beginning of the story or in the title, students must summarize the abstract while reading the full text. The abstract of the sample reading text is in the first paragraph, “It was the day of the big cross-country run. Students from seven different primary schools in and around the small town were warming up and walking the route through thick evergreen forest.” Therefore, the abstract of this text can be summarized as “students are warming up for the next big cross-country run.” This short sentence describes the scene in which the students are preparing for the competition and points out that the main event described in this article is a large-scale cross-country run. A concise and clear abstract can help students quickly sort out the theme of the narrative and also stimulate students’ curiosity and interest in reading the following text.

#### **3.2 Orientation**

Orientation describes external factors such as time, place, characters, and background at the story’s beginning. In this discourse, the time is “the day of the big cross-country run,” the place is a “thick evergreen forest,” and the characters are “I (a special education teacher), David, the school’s coach, and other students,” and the background is “the big cross-country run is about to begin.” What is worth paying attention to is the priority of each character. Obviously, “I” and “David” are the main characters, the two have a teacher-student relationship. The school’s coach and other students are the secondary character. When continuing writing, students should keep previous character relationships. In addition, to promote the development of the story, the location of the continuation part of this article should be changed to “the track of cross-country running.” Although this place did not appear in the previous article, this change is necessary.

#### **3.3 Complicating Action**

Complicating action is the tortuous development of the event. It is the core of the narrative structure, which usually consists of a series of narrative sentences or dialogues arranged chronologically. In this story, although David is an inflexible child with a brain disease, he seriously completes every cross-country training. His classmates and teachers also regard him as an ordinary child. When the school

coach found David and asked him to choose whether to take part in the cross-country race, the incident triggered a big conflict in the whole story. "Will David take part in cross-country running?" Then, David refused to take part in the upcoming cross-country race, which became another skirmish between the protagonist's inner goal and the task he would accomplish. The hint of this conflict can be seen in the foreshadowing of the previous text (David is suffering from brain disease, but he tries his best in every training). "I," the author of this article, was surprised by David's decision and then met David. The story's development ends abruptly, and the rest of the story needs to be completed by students. A well-structured story is like a complete circle, where conflicting events and the climax always link up. If the conflict is to solve a problem, then the climax should solve the problem. According to the development of the story, conflict has emerged, and what students need to do in the continuation task is to solve the problem. From the second sentence at the beginning of the paragraph, we know that David will stand on the starting line of the cross-country field. However, there is still a subtle conflict that has not been resolved. That is, David refuses to participate in the competition because of mental illness, although he is willing to. According to the first sentence at the beginning of the paragraph, "I" should have helped him overcome the psychological barrier and persuaded him to participate in the competition. Based on the above analysis, it is not difficult to find that the complicating action of the story should be "the coach let David choose whether to participate in the race, David refused to participate because of physical defects, the author persuaded David to participate, and David completed the cross-country race."

### 3.4 Evaluation

Evaluation is the analysis or comment interspersed by the narrator in the narration. It is the description of the personality, attitude, or psychological activities of the characters, which can reflect the narrator's emotional bias. Comment is a kind of shelving and stillness to the dynamic presentation of the plot, which makes the appearance of the ending more intimidating. [2] A good storyteller will not just write about what happened but will add the impact of such plot development on the characters after a particular plot. Evaluation includes direct evaluation and indirect evaluation. In this story, the narrator describes the psychological feelings at that time and his opinions and judgments on a particular situation, which belong to direct evaluation. "He had worked so hard for this event!" belongs to the author's view on the diligent training performance of David. "I knew the coach meant well and thought he was doing the right thing." This sentence explains the coach's inadvertent mistake and kind intentions. There are many comments in the last paragraph of the reading text, such as "But at school, his classmates thought of him as a regular kid" and "That was why none of the children thought it unusual that David had decided to join the cross-country team. It just took him longer-that's all." These sentences reflect students' attitudes towards "David has a brain disease" and "David wants to participate in cross-country running." They do not regard David as an abnormal child, and it is normal for him to take part in cross-country running. At the end of this paragraph, "I was familiar with the challenges David faced and was proud of his strong determination." It shows that the author can understand David's difficulty and the significant challenges that may be encountered in the competition. The author was proud of David's firm determination.

The evaluations above demonstrate that the story's protagonist has been in a warm group. Students and teachers around him do not mind his disadvantages in cross-country running and fully recognize his efforts to participate in the competition. In addition, these evaluations also vividly depict the personality and psychological changes of the characters so as to help students conceive the plot trend of the continuation task. Taking David as an example, he is a hard-working, tenacious child who never gives up but has a sensitive heart. It is because of his personality that readers can infer his emotional changes, such as he changed from firmness to hesitation at the beginning, became firm again after persuasion, and finally became proud of what he achieved. Because of the different experiences, everyone will have different feelings and understanding of the same story. The difference often lies in evaluations full of diversities and possibilities. However, it is worth mentioning that if students want to achieve alignment between the continuation text and the original text, the most important thing is to keep the image and personality of the characters consistent.

### 3.5 Result and Coda

Zhou pointed out that the result is an account of the core contradiction of the story, which marks the end of the narrative, and it includes the fate of the characters and the realization or failure of the goal. [3] Will David succeed finally? Can he hold on to the whole race? Can he win the prize? The answers to these questions can be served as the result of this story, and students can write freely within a reasonable range. In addition, the student's writing can also cover the coda. Although the coda is the least frequent

of the six elements, its function should not be underestimated. The coda is to illuminate or sublimate the story's theme and bring readers' thoughts back to the real world from the story. It is beneficial for people to deeply understand problems in reality.

#### **4. The Strategies of Applying the Model to Plot Conception**

##### ***4.1 Sort out the Complicating Action, Find out the Key Conflicts, and Design Reasonable Climax***

Complicating action is the core part of the narrative structure, which occupies more than half of the continuation part. The complicating action depends on the change of a series of verbs, so the teacher should guide the students to focus on the verbs in the text and find out the main conflicts while reading the story. Conflict runs through the beginning and end of the story, and it can promote the development of the plot. Conflict means opposition and contradiction, and there are primary and secondary conflicts. When reading the original text of the continuation task, students should focus on the opposition between the core characters and others and then find out all the contradictions and conflicts in the original text. Next, the primary and secondary conflicts are determined by judging whether the conflict is related to the core characters and whether it runs through the whole story. In order to complete the overall narrative structure of the story, students must solve the conflicts in the original text and promote the development of events so as to design a reasonable climax. The most significant rule for designing a climax is consistency with the logic of the original text. In addition, the successful design of the climax should not only serve the external needs of plot development but also resonate with the theme. In this way, students can achieve the goal of raising the holistic level of the story by setting the befitting climax.

Taking the above continuation task as an example, how can we set a reasonable climax for David, who suffers from brain disease but insists on training? In the complicating action section, it has been found that the central conflict of the story is "Will David compete?" Then, the climax must solve the conflict, so he must participate in the competition. Moreover, from the foreshadowing in the original text, David should encounter difficulties during the competition because of his disabled legs. For example, he ran out of strength and suddenly fell. What would David do in such an emergency? The solution to the problem means the arrival of the climax. Such a fantastic climax is not only consistent with the protagonist's character setting but can also highlight the personality of the character and imply the theme of the article.

##### ***4.2 Pay Attention to the Evaluation Part, Analyze the Personality and Emotional Changes of the Characters***

With the deepening and maturity of cognitive concepts, the requirements of the continuation task for senior high school students are not only to simply write the causes and consequences of an event, but also to portray characters, events and environment, express their emotions and comment on the written events. The penetration of evaluation in the narrative structure not only helps enhance the story's appeal but also helps readers form their views on characters and events.<sup>[4]</sup> When reading the original text, students should not only pay attention to the evaluations directly expressed by the author but also pay attention to the indirect evaluations. To be specific, students can analyze characters' emotional changes by paying attention to expression, action, and language description. The emotional changes of the characters can often reflect their personality characteristics, and the character characteristics can inspire the readers to think one question, that is, "What the character does is reasonable and what is unreasonable." Therefore, students can limit the development of the plot to a reasonable range under the principle of following the original character characteristics. It is worth noting that students should not only analyze the emotional changes and personality of the main characters but also pay attention to the emotional description and image shaping of the secondary characters. Adding an appropriate description of the secondary characters in the continuation enriches the article. For another thing, it can make the image of the main characters more distinct. Individual character determines behavior, which is a concrete and unique embodiment of personality in a scene. Therefore, when setting up the plot of continuation, the students should firmly grasp the character of the characters, which is beneficial to the realization of emotional alignment.

##### ***4.3 Skillfully Set the Result to Highlight the Theme of the Story***

The result refers to the end of the story. It is an account of the core contradiction of the story, which includes the fate of the main character, the realization or failure of the goal.<sup>[5]</sup> The ending can be a joyful

happy ending, a sad tragic ending, or a thought-provoking open ending. An excellent ending can serve as the vital finishing touch, which can sublimate the theme, explain the resolution of the conflict, or arouse the reader's thinking. However, many students neglect the design of the result of the continuation task, which is embodied in that students cannot think about the ending from different angles, and even the writing deviates from the theme, or there is no end. Only after reading through the full text and sorting out the story's beginning, development and climax can students understand the gist of the story. Based on a clear gist of the story, students can carefully design the result, arouse readers' resonance, and give readers a good reading experience.

## 5. Conclusion

Given the students' shortcomings in the continuation task, this paper takes the continuation task in volumes I and II of the new college entrance examination in 2022 as an example. Then, the writer uses Labov's narrative analysis model to analyze the authentic text. The study found that students can improve their plot conception of the continuation task by sorting out the complicating action of the story, analyzing the evaluation part, and skillfully setting the result. Therefore, in the actual teaching, teachers can guide students to extract the clues of story development, thus strengthening the alignment between students' continuation and the original text.

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