

Trope or Trap? Roleplaying Narrative and Length in Instructional Video

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ABSTRACT

A concern that librarians face when creating video is whether users will actually watch the video they are directed to. This is a significant issue when it comes to how-to and other point-of-need videos. How should a video be designed to ensure maximum student interest and engagement?

Many of the basic skills demonstrated in how-to videos are crucial for success in research but are not always directly connected to a class. Whether a video is selected for inclusion by an instructor or viewed after it is noticed by a student depends on how viewable the video is perceived to be.

This article will discuss the results of a survey of more than thirteen hundred respondents. This survey was designed to establish the broad preferences of the viewers of instructional how-to videos, specifically focusing on the question of whether the length and presence of a role-playing narrative enhances or detracts from the viewer experience, depending on demographic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Length

Since the seminal 2010 study by Bowles-Terry, Hensley, and Hinchliffe established emerging best practices for pace, length, content, look and feel, and video versus text, a variety of works compiling best practices for video have been created.¹ The very successful *Library Minute* videos from Arizona State University resulted in a collection of how-tos and best practices by Rachel Perry.² These included tips on addressing an audience, planning, content, length, frugality, and experimentation. In 2014 Coastal Carolina nursing students were surveyed for their preferences in video, resulting in another set of best practices. These focused on video length, speaking pace, zoom functionality, and use of callouts.³ Martin and Martin's extensive 2015 review covers content, compatibility, accessibility, and audio.⁴

The recommended length listed in these best practices varies widely. Thirty-seconds to a minute is recommended by Bowles-Terry, Hensley, and Hinchliffe, while Perry recommends no longer than ninety seconds.⁵ The Coastal Carolina study and Seminole State review recommend no longer than three minutes.⁶ Nearly all the articles reviewed stress that complicated concepts should be broken into more easily comprehensible chunks to avoid overwhelming student cognitive load.

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Narrative Roleplay Scenario

The typical roleplay involves a hypothetical student who needs some sort of assistance and is helped through the process using library resources. Often there is also a hypothetical guide, who can be a librarian, friend, or professor. These hypothetical situations are recorded in a variety of ways: from live-action video recordings, to screencast voice-overs, to text.

The efficacy of such tools in library video have been explored little, if at all. Devine, Quinn, and Aguilar's 2014 study explores the usage and effectiveness of micro- and macro-narratives in resident information literacy instruction,⁷ but there is no question that this instructional scenario is very different than how-to instructional videos.

The interplay between student interest and such narratives is addressed by emotional interest theory, which states that adding unrelated but interesting material increases attention by energizing the learner. These unrelated pieces of engaging material are known as seductive details. This "highly interesting and entertaining information . . . is only tangentially related to the topic but is irrelevant to the author's intended theme."⁸ Exploration of this concept through experimental study has indicated that seductive details are detrimental to learning.⁹ Some evidence indicates that learners are more likely to remember these details than the important content itself thanks to cognitive load issues.¹⁰ However, there have also been cases where seductive details have improved recall.¹¹ In their 2015 study, Park, Flowerday, and Brünken argue that the format and presentation of seductive details have varying effect on learning processes and that they can be used to positive effect.¹² In this paper, the seductive details to be studied are those of the roleplay narrative used to frame instruction in how-to videos.

METHODS

Survey Design

The survey was designed to explore three questions:

- Does the length of the video affect a user's willingness to watch it?
- Do users prefer videos that are pure instruction or those that use a roleplay narrative to deliver content?
- Does the demographic of the viewer affect a video's viewability?

The survey was revised in collaboration with a survey design and statistical specialist at the Penn State Library's Data Learning Center. The completed survey was then entered into Qualtrics for implementation.

Implementation

Implementation and subject-gathering was done through a survey-research sampling company that provided both a wide demographic and rapid data collection. This was sponsored by an institutional grant. Subjects from a variety of institution types and geographic locations were solicited via email invitation to complete a survey that explored their perspectives on instructional videos.

The twenty-question survey was focused on respondents of a traditional college age. Implementation resulted in 1,305 responses out of 1,528 surveys. After implementation, results were compiled and analyzed by a statistical expert at the institutional data center. Nearly all the analyses to follow are simple cross-tabulations of respondent choices as correlations between demographics and preference were minor based on a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics

The survey, which was limited to a traditionally college-aged population (eighteen to twenty-four), produced a nearly 1:1 gender distribution (figure 1).

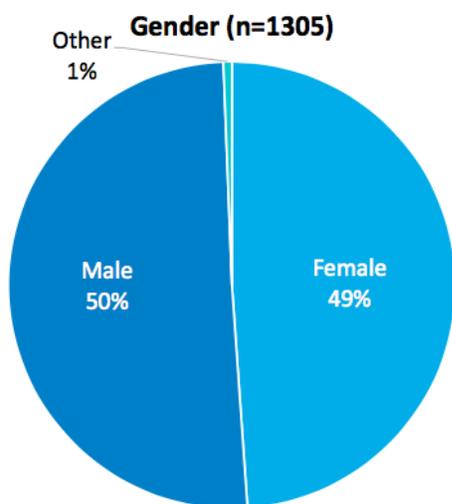
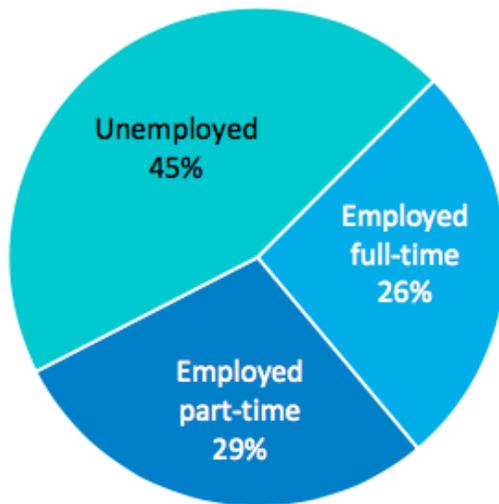


Figure 1. Age and gender distribution.

The survey had around 64 percent student participants, 77 percent of these attending school full time. Of those full-time students, 60 percent were resident students, and only 9 percent were solely online students. Unemployed participants were more likely to be full-time resident students whereas online students were more likely to be employed full-time. (See figures 2 and 3.)

Employment (n=1305)



Student status (n=1305)

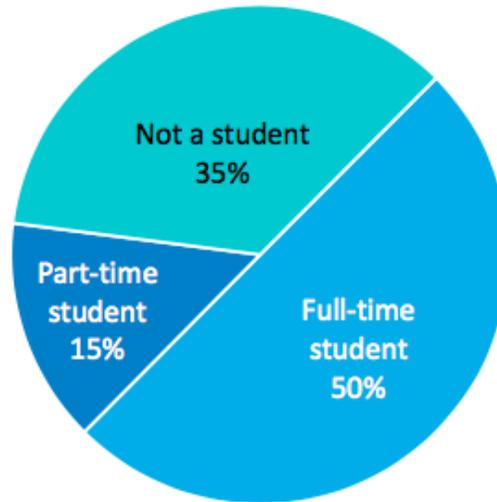


Figure 2. Employment and student status distribution.

I attend class.... (n=842)

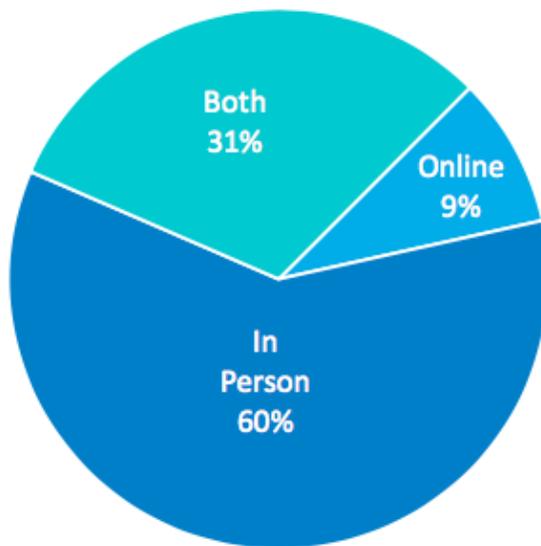


Figure 3. Resident versus online status distribution.

Information and Video Confidence

The distribution of confidence in information-seeking ability hovered around 90 percent. However, at most, only half of respondents had any familiarity with Google Scholar (see figure 4). This tells us several things, the most important being that what librarians consider appropriate confidence in information-seeking is very different from what the college-aged layperson considers appropriate. This supports Colón-Aguirre and Fleming-May's 2012 study that indicates that students are likely to use free online websites that require the least effort for their research.¹³

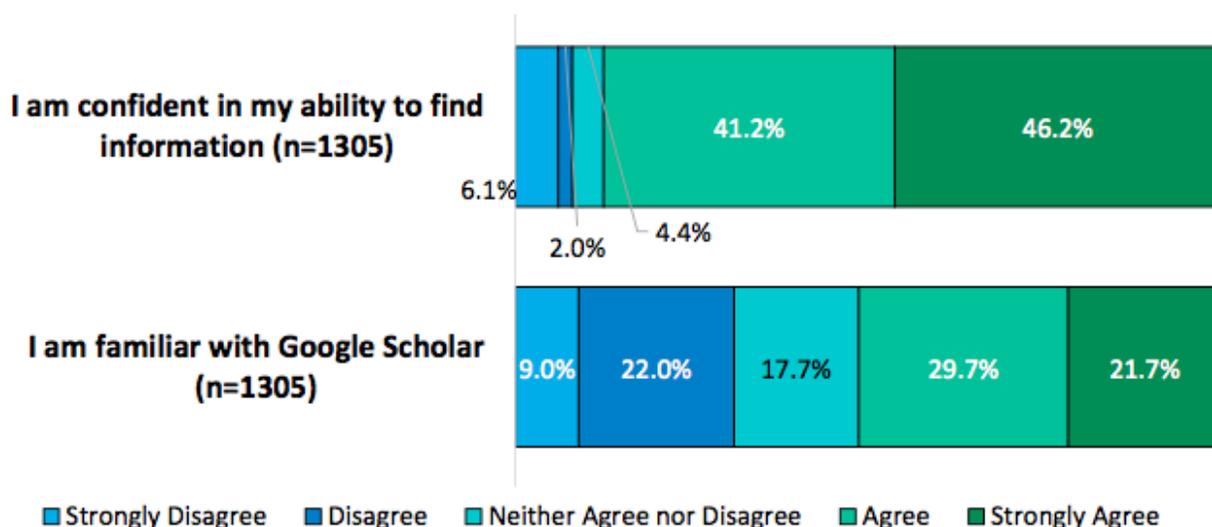


Figure 4. Information-seeking confidence.

Video Length

Length of a video does play a role for most. About 70 percent of participants indicated that they are either more likely to watch a video with a timestamp or will rarely watch unless the time is indicated (see figure 5). Timestamp is easily provided by most video players.

The mean maximum time for college-age participants' willingness to watch was about four and a half minutes. The median was approximately three minutes. In general, shorter appears better: three to four minutes is around the maximum length that most eighteen to twenty-nine year olds are willing to watch. This contradicts all the referenced best practices but those proffered by Baker, who described thirty to ninety seconds as ideal video viewing time. Her study found that 41 percent of her students preferred videos that were one to three minutes long, but 24 percent preferred three to five minutes. Because of this, she recommends videos that are three minutes or less.¹⁴

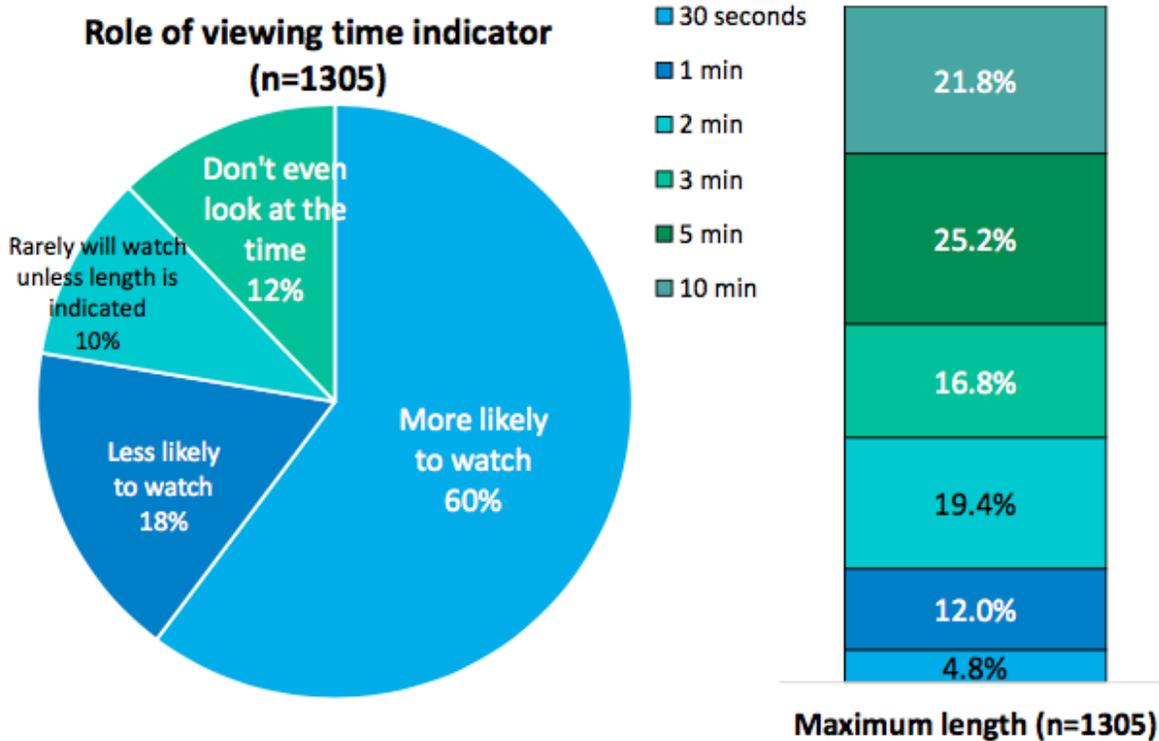


Figure 5. Perspective on viewing time.

Instructions versus Roleplay

The bulk of the survey was questions related to two videos. Both videos were under three minutes long and were produced using TechSmith’s Camtasia screencast software.

The screencast video simply explained how to complete a research task—searching Google Scholar for an article addressing a theme in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Viewers were guided through the process of finding articles on this topic by a single narrator. No dramatized roleplay situation was presented.

The narrative video guided the participants through a hypothetical situation dramatized by two actors. The scenario was a common one—a student procrastinating on a paper and asking her roommate for assistance at the last minute. The roommate guided the student through use of Google Scholar, completing the same tasks as the screencast video.

Participants watched both videos and answered a series of questions on their reactions. Number of views was tracked on the media player, verifying that both videos were viewed.

Screencasts

While watching the screencast video, most participants found that the narrator was trustworthy and that they were learning. Only 15 percent felt the video needed an example scenario. Though there were mixed experiences as to the length of the video, the timing of the video seemed on

point, as only 11.6 percent strongly believed that the video took too long and 7.5 percent strongly felt that went too quickly. (See figure 6.)

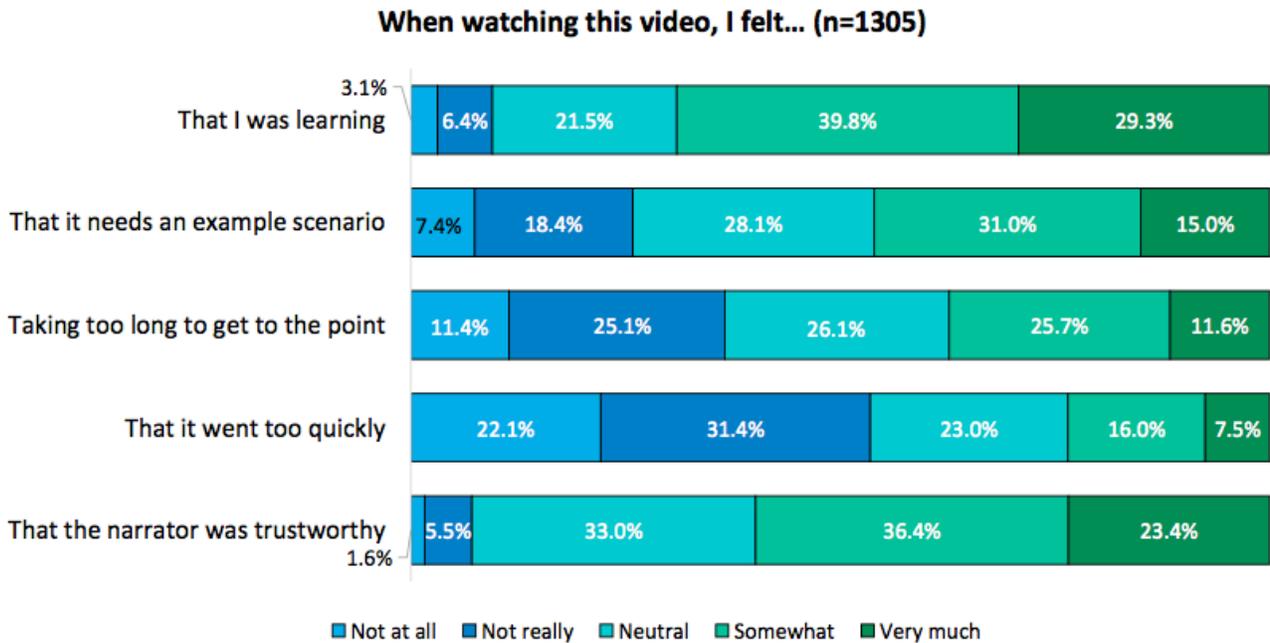


Figure 6. Screencast reactions.

When asked an open-ended question about what struck them the most in the screencast video, respondents most frequently stated that they found it to be informative and interesting, or at least neutral. However, a variety of responses were observed, both negative and positive, or even contradictory.

It is worth noting that within this open-ended format, dislike of the narrator’s voice was independently assigned as one of the top three issues. This stresses the importance of coherent and pleasant narration, as it is something that viewers will likely notice.



What struck out to you most (n=315)

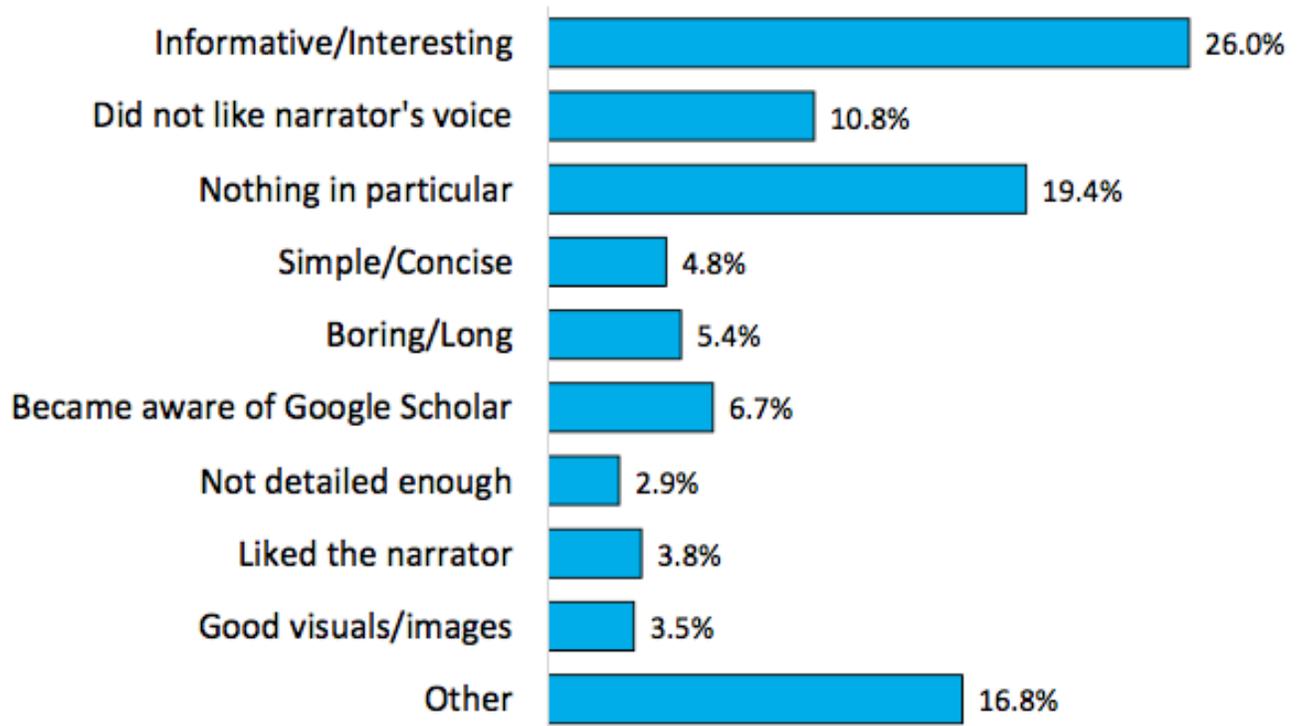


Figure 7. Open-ended questions: screencast.

Narrative

While watching the narrative video, participants found that they could relate to the characters or scenario and found that they were learning as much as they were when watching the screencast (see figure 8). However, there were mixed responses regarding video length and credibility of the narrator.

When compared across demographics, employed respondents and students were more likely to agree that they could relate to the scenario than unemployed and nonstudents. Male respondents and employed were more likely to think that the video went too fast than female and unemployed respondents.

When asked an open-ended question on what most struck them about the narrative video, respondents most often stated that they found it to be boring and long, though a good number also indicated it was interesting and informative (see figure 9). Just as with the screencast video, a variety of responses, both negative and positive, were observed, some even conflicting.

When watching this video, I felt... (n=1305)

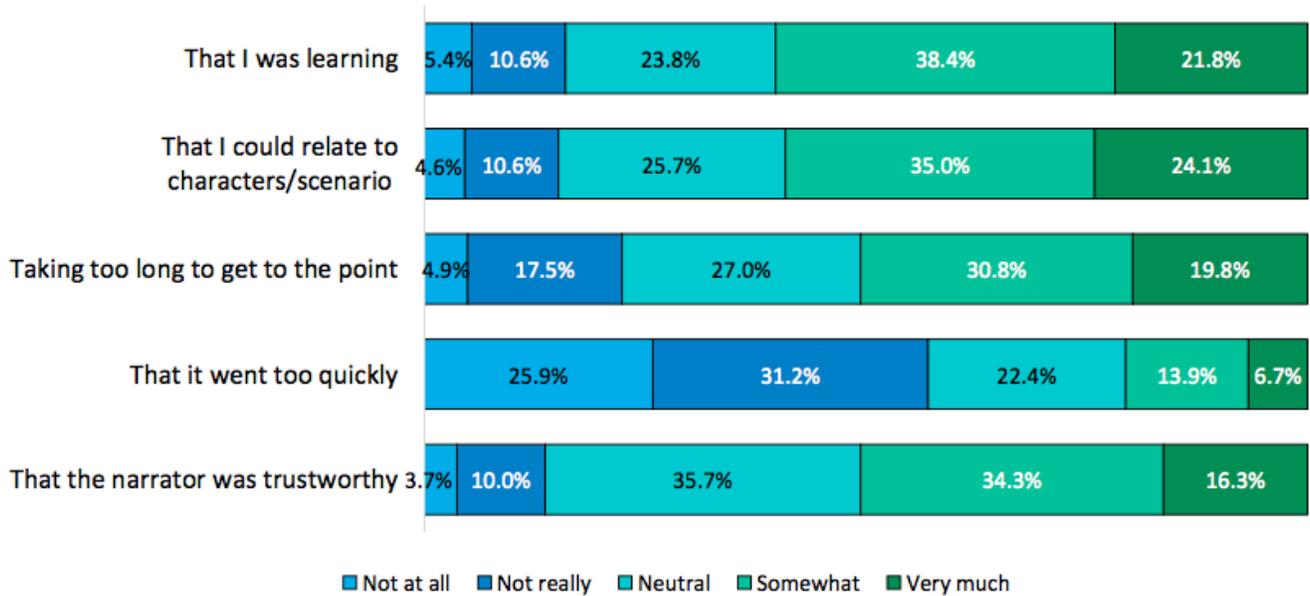


Figure 8. Narrative reactions.

What struck out to you most (n=334)

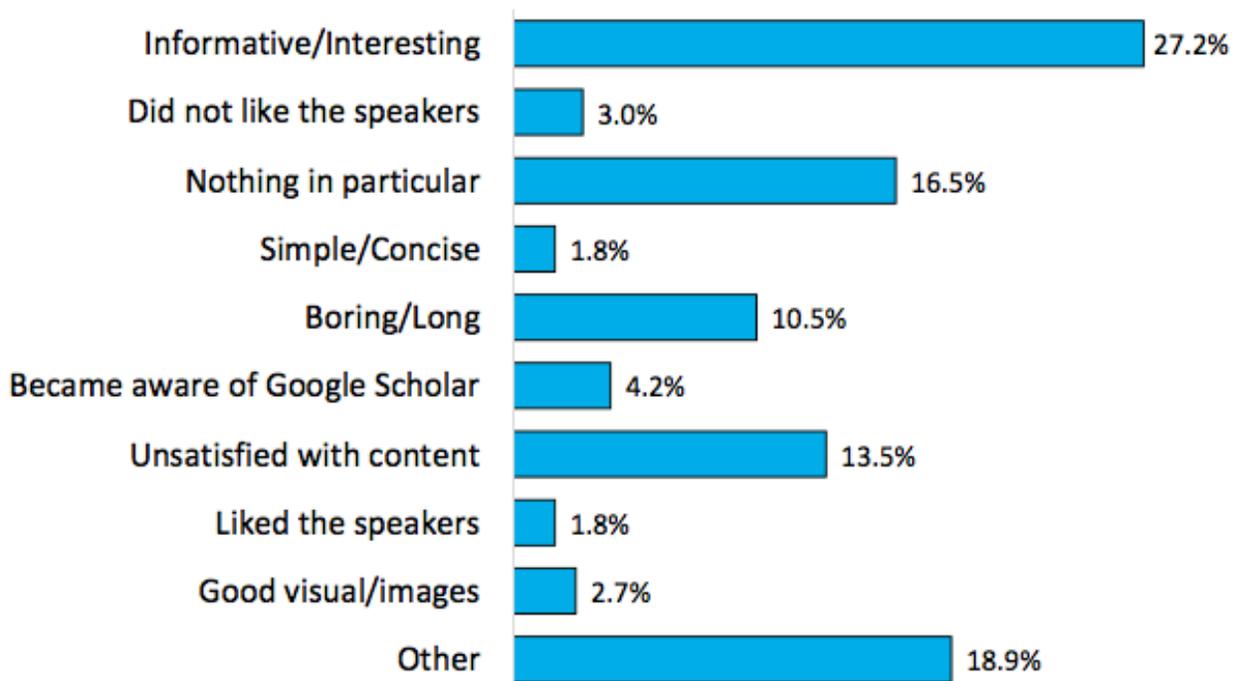


Figure 9. Open-ended questions: narrative.



In addition, 13.5 percent of respondents were unsatisfied with the content of the video. Just as with the screencast video, a variety of responses, both negative and positive, were observed, some even conflicting.

Screencast versus Narrative

The screencast video tended to be preferred by respondents, with higher average scores in content, engagement, learning value, and narrator trustworthiness. In contrast, respondents also thought that the screencast video moved too quickly compared to the narrative video. Additionally, participants were more impatient during the narrative video (see figure 10).

Statistics for differences in screencast and narrative* (n=1305)

	Mean	SD	SE	CI
Learning value	0.250	1.054	0.029	(0.190, 0.310)
Impatience	-0.420	1.386	0.038	(-.500, -.350)
Quick speed	0.110	0.996	0.028	(-0.019-, 0.310)
Trustworthy narrator	0.250	1.030	0.029	(.332,.472)

*Score defined as 1 = “Not very much” to 5 = “Very much”, with Difference = Screencast score – narrative score.

Red rows indicate higher scores for the narrative video.

Figure 10. Screencast versus narrative.

To observe differences between the screencast and narrative videos with regards to respondent reactions within specific population demographics, MANOVA test was performed. This test revealed that none of the p-values were significant (at $\alpha = .05$), leaving no correlation between student status, employment status, and reaction to each video. A more liberal interpretation of the data from this analysis might conclude that differences in impatience across student status were possibly significant ($\alpha = .10$), with students being more likely to exhibit a smaller difference in

impatience for the two video styles. The preferences for screencast over narrative video did not change when the demographics were spliced.

CONCLUSIONS

It is impossible to please everyone all the time—at least that is what survey results suggest. There are several takeaways to this study:

Video length matters, especially as a consideration before the video is viewed. Timestamps should be included in video creation, or it is highly likely that the video will not be viewed. The video player is key here, as some video players include video length, while others do not. Videos that exceed four minutes are unlikely to be viewed unless they are required.

Voice quality in narration matters. Although preference in type of voice inevitably varies, the actor's voice is noticed over production value. It is important that the narrator speaks evenly and clearly.

For brief how-to videos, there is a small preference for screencast instructional videos over a narrative roleplay scenario. The results of the survey indicate that roleplay videos should be well-produced, brief, and high quality. However, what constitutes high quality is not very well established.¹⁵

Finally, screencast videos should include an example scenario, however brief, to ground the viewer in the task.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Next steps for research might include a more refined survey focusing on the results of this study. Of equal value would be a series of focus groups that are given both a screencast and narrative video and asked to discuss their preferences.

Though a wide variety of students were surveyed, limits of this dataset prevented the exploration of specific correlations among students attending different institution types or among those pursuing different majors. Further research addressing the differences among these student bodies would be a welcome addition to the literature.

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- ¹⁵ Towler et al., "The Seductive Details," 71.