

STORYTELLING HANDBOOK



The Basics of Storytelling



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This handbook will guide you in telling the stories of your community. This handbook is full of information about the basics of storytelling. Rules, story structure, and three important elements of a story that keep the narrative moving. Not sure what storytelling has to do with the true history and events your project will be based on? Read the section on narrative nonfiction to find out. Not all nonfiction is dry and boring!

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We have always told stories. Since we were in the caves, or on windswept plains, or settling nearby the river deltas, scratching for survival, we told each other stories. While in tribes, or in clans, we told our stories to each other, around the communal fires we built, telling ourselves we could defeat the terrors out there, beyond the circle of light cast by the flames. Our stories gave us courage, and when infused by real-world experience, they gave us useful knowledge, equipping us to deal with the circumstances confronting us—eat this berry, not that one, store food in a hole dug in the ground, surround yourself with friends on cold nights. Stories are our tools, our elixirs, our libraries and histories. They are integral to who we have been and are vehicles for imagining what we might become. They nurture and feed us. Without stories, we are aimless, holding out torches against the setting sun. With them, we are less afraid, able to recognize our neighbors as fellow keepers of these tales by which we grow generation upon generation. In inventing stories, we invented ourselves, through telling them to each other, we make a community.

Since we began to gather ourselves together into towns and cities, our stories have helped us organize ourselves. The narratives we exchange give the members of our community a shared sense not only of place but also of purpose. Think of the cities that have gained character by the accounts told through them: Montgomery, Alabama, linked to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, or Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, known as the birthplace of the great American experiment. Think of how stories can be redemptive: the tale of Detroit working its way back from the brink to become known as a city of second chances. We live in an historical moment when telling our stories is crucial, because they become our truth—a truth that circulates and gives ourselves a vision of our life chances.

For all these reasons the Be Here project is an essential venture right now. We need the light and the warmth of stories authentically told and shared. We need them especially from community members who are not typically heard—the citizen storytellers, corner oral historians who have a wealth of lived experience not found in official records or broadcast reports. Our technological tools now allow us to give local voices a new platform; we can pin content to geolocated areas that are triggered through smart phone apps. Visitors walk onto a certain street or plaza and the space suddenly opens up its history, hidden riches for them to take. This initiative is a new and unique form of storytelling, yet it is also part of a deep tradition of making a world for ourselves in which we don't just survive, but we thrive.

– *Seph Rodney*

Nonfiction narrative goes under many names, including creative nonfiction, literary journalism, and fact-based storytelling.

Nonfiction narrative combines great research with compelling, character-driven storytelling. Nonfiction narratives use details to create setting, character and theme. Although they are telling true stories, narratives aim to bring the events to life for readers, making it three-dimensional as opposed to simply stating the facts. Other types of nonfiction might focus solely on teaching the audience facts about a topic in a straightforward manner.

For example, a purely informational nonfiction account of a historical event like a war, might tell you dates, give data about how many people died in a war, and relate the facts about the key events of the battles. A narrative nonfiction account would paint the picture of the war, talking about sights, sounds, smells, the soldiers lives and thoughts (all gathered from careful research), and the commanders' personalities, interests, and world views – things that would give the audience a fuller understanding of them as people.

Narrative nonfiction is not made up. It is fact-based. The details added to bring the story to life are pulled from research – first-person interviews or documents like letters. Any descriptions of the setting or events are created using first-person accounts and an understanding of the time period based on research. The characters are real people and their personalities are simply brought to life by what we know about their hopes, dreams, demeanors, etc.

Basically, it's fact-based storytelling that makes people want to keep listening, watching, or reading.

The following pages cover the basic of storytelling. These basics are relevant for nonfiction writing as much as they are for fiction writing. Though the settings, characters, conflict, and the actual events of the story cannot be controlled by you, the story creator, they should be told in the form of a story narrative.

This means that you need an understanding of the basics of storytelling – story structure and elements that when combined, can create a compelling story that not only entertains, it relays the true story of events that happened in your town.

Storytelling rules are helpful guidelines to follow, not true rules. The most important rule when telling a story based on fact – like the stories you will create for this project – is to be as accurate as possible. But you also want your story to be engaging and keep the audience’s interest.

The following “rules” were tweeted by former Pixar employee, Emma Coats. We’ve narrowed them down and reworked them for the purpose of this handbook. While keeping the backbone of true facts in your story, see if you can convey those facts using these elements of great storytelling. Read the original 22 rules from Emma Coats: <https://www.fastcocreate.com/3018559/pixars-22-rules-of-storytelling-visualized>

- 1** What is interesting to the audience is more important than what is fun to do as the creator. They can be very different.
- 2** What’s the essence of your story? Tell it in a sentence or two. If you know that, you can build out from there.
- 3** Come up with your ending before you figure out your middle. Seriously. Endings are hard, get yours working up front.
- 4** Basic story structure looks like: Once upon a time ____. Every day, _____. One day _____. Because of that, _____. Because of that, _____. Until finally ____.
- 5** Sometimes your original theme isn’t the same by the time you’re done writing. This is okay. Now rewrite now that you know the real theme.

- 7** Give your characters opinions. Nice, passive characters might seem likable to you as you write, but it’s poison to the audience.
- 6** Conflict and change are important. What is your character good at, comfortable with? Do the opposite. Challenge them. How do they deal?
- 8** What are the stakes? Give us reason to root for the character. What happens if they don’t succeed? Stack the odds against them.
- 9** Simplify. Remove aspects of the story that don’t match your theme. You may feel like you’re losing valuable stuff but it strengthens your story.
- 10** Why must you tell THIS story? What’s the belief burning within you that your story feeds off of? That’s the heart of it.

Still unsure? Here’s a video series from *Bloop Animation* with examples from Pixar movies to bring the elements of storytelling to life: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLY6PCL9yInRSaO608L0ocvzxusr_35XfC

A story has three structural elements: A beginning, a middle, and an end.

Learn more about story structure and “The Three C’s” (next page) in UNESCO’s *How to Write a Documentary Script*: http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/programme_doc_documentary_script.pdf.

The Beginning

The beginning sets the tone and mood for the story and hints at the surprises that lie ahead by raising the right questions in the minds of the audience.

A good beginning does these things:

- Sets up the flavor of things to come, both in story and mood.
- Establishes the message you want to communicate to the audience.
- Creates curiosity among the audience of the things to come.
- Shows change or the promise of change.
- Creates the element of consequence – an event that causes change.

The *inciting incident* is often a common feature used in the beginning to start a story. It is an incident that radically upsets the balance of forces within the story. It is a dynamic and fully developed event, not something vague. The inciting incident is any event that swings reality in either a negative or positive way, creating imbalance relative to the previous way.

The Middle

Many a time, a story starts off, but the middle becomes boring. A story must move progressively forward to a final action. The events must become bigger and better and their excitement and involvement must gradually increase as the story moves forward. This is called *progression*. The movement forward

needs to be sharp and planned.

The key to a good middle is structure. The storyteller must ensure that the middle of the story presents a chain of logic designed to prove its core assertion. Each event and action must be pertinent and in keeping with the subject and tone of the story.

The End

The end is usually a reiteration of the core assertion of the story. In many stories, this is done by hammering home the assertion with a ‘key feature’, which could be anything from a phrase to a visual, or many visuals, to one last event that sets the impression. All or many issues are hopefully, or at least temporarily, resolved in the end of a story.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of endings in stories:

Closed End. One where all the questions raised in the story are answered and all emotions evoked are satisfied.

Open End. One that leaves some or many questions unanswered and some emotions unfulfilled. The questions left are answerable and the emotions resolvable and all that has gone before has led to clear and limited alternatives that make a certain degree of closure possible for the audience.

In non-fiction, the mood of the story must be determined by the events of real life and cannot be controlled by the storyteller. The storyteller must judge the mood of the ending after studying the conclusions the story has come to based on the turn of real-life events.

Character

Characters give a human face to any story. They experience the story for the audience. The more the audience knows about a person in the story, the closer they feel to that person. This empathy is important because, through it, the audience can get emotionally involved and be that much more affected by it.

Two types of characters:

Active Characters. Those that initiate the events that take place around them. They take action and make things happen. For example, someone who starts a campaign to change the law is an active character.

Passive Characters. Those that react to situations thrust upon them without their choosing. Their actions are brought upon by things happening to them. For example, a farmer whose village has seen drought for two years and struggles to make ends meet is a passive character.

Conflict

Without conflict, there is no reason for the story to move forward. Characters try and attain their goals in the face of opposition and obstacles. These opposing forces could be big or small, one or many, brief or protracted and in any shape or form. Opposition could come from other characters, organized entities or the situation and environment surrounding the characters.

In non-fiction work, you have to study the various conflicts facing the story's real-life characters and portray them in the story. You must then follow the characters as they try and overcome their 'opponents' in the story. Characters might not overcome all or any of the conflict. Real life isn't always made up of

heroes and villains, and the character may fail to achieve what he set out to do.

Two types of conflict:

Outer Conflict. An antagonism from the world around them. This could be from other people, objects, organizations or the environment.

Inner Conflict. Conflict inside themselves. This may include their psychology, weaknesses, fears, dark sides, etc. Many stories have a combination of both types because one rarely occurs with the exclusion of the other.

Change

Change is some aspect of reality becoming different in a particular way. Change must occur in a story. In the beginning, the inciting incident introduces change to the character's life. In the middle, the character must face conflict and, when they do, things change around them and possibly within them. In the end, something must have changed from the beginning and this change lead to the resolution. You must choose which change to include in your story based on how meaningful the change is.

Sometimes change can reverse back to the way things were before the change took place. This is in itself a new change even though the story goes back to a previous state. Here, the change itself is what happens.

Two types of change:

Outer Change. The world around the character changes. This could be physical change, change in other people, objects, situations or the environment.

Inner Change. The character changes within. This could be their opinions,

