

Storytelling Guidelines

STRUCTURE

1. Identify the protagonist, his/her goal, and set the stage.

The **protagonist** is the individual driving the action of the story. That character may be the hero, villain, or simply an onlooker, but what distinguishes her or him most from the other characters is that **the story is driven by his pursuit of a singular goal**. “Setting the stage” is the brief introduction that helps the reader enter the world of the story *and* understand the protagonist’s motivation in pursuing her/his particular goal.

2. Describe the first attempt.

What steps does the protagonist take to begin his or her pursuit of the goal? Is it a direct attempt, or are there preparations that must be noted first?

3. Introduce the first barrier.

In a good story, the protagonist does not simply reach the goal in a single try: somebody stands in his way, or a hurdle that is not easily crossed appears unexpectedly. The more challenging the adversary or hurdle, the more interesting the story becomes. These obstacles the writer puts in the way cause the audience to wonder, “How will the character ever get there?”

4. Describe the second attempt.

After failing following one line of attack, the protagonist must find a new path to the goal. New allies may be enlisted or innovative solutions may be tried.

Introduce succeeding barriers and describe additional attempts until you can:

5. Resolve the story.

The resolution can be the protagonist’s attainment of the goal, but in more interesting stories, the protagonist ends up with something beyond the stated goal itself: a greater lesson about the world in which he (or she) is operating. This is the *meaning* of the story (i.e., why it’s worth telling and re-telling.)

QUALITIES

Keep it lean, but include telling details.

A good story can be told in a couple of minutes or conveyed in a few hundred words. Like good jokes, they are short, to the point, but include the details necessary to paint a vivid picture that pulls the audience in.

Unpredictable is better.

Just think of the last time you were in a movie and knew where the story was going after only five minutes. Over 2,000 years ago, Aristotle said, “Narrative demands reversal.” The advice still holds.

Engage the emotions.

The principle advantage stories have over data is their ability to engage the audience on an emotional level. As you craft your story, continually look for the moments or descriptions that trigger an emotional reaction.

Deliver truth.

Good stories “feel” true, independent of supporting data. (Allegorical tales such as the ant and the grasshopper are an excellent example of fiction and truth coexisting in the same story.)

Deliver meaning.

This is the ultimate payoff a good story: it helps us understand how the world works. People are inundated with information and are not looking for more. What they seek is meaning – a way to arrange and understand the information they receive. Good stories deliver meaning every time.

