

STORYTELLING TOOLKIT



The Basics of Storytelling



Smithsonian
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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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Nonfiction Narrative

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.

Choosing a Topic

The topic of your project should be linked to the theme of the traveling exhibition coming to your community. First, make sure you understand the exhibition's themes. Check MoMS website for complete details on the exhibition content: <http://www.museumonmainstreet.org>. Now it's time to choose a topic.

1 Find your interest. What interests you about this theme? It's important for you to be interested in the topic. Your enthusiasm for the topic will help you convey the story to your intended audience in an engaging way.

2 Brainstorm. Taking as much time as you need, write down the themes in the exhibition that interest you. Which ones have the strongest connection to your community? How do they connect to a larger national topic or history?

3 Determine your audience. Who is your intended audience? Identifying your audience will help narrow down which themes will work best for that audience, determine how you should frame your story and what medium might be best to convey the story.

4 Ensure you have the access to the elements you need. Once you have a theme that works with your interests and audience, do a quick preliminary search for research sources, images, interviewees, archival video, old newspapers, and more, to ensure you will have enough content to complete your project.

5 Narrow your topic. Now that you have an idea of what assets are available, make sure your topic is narrow enough to do it justice. For instance, the topic of sports in your community is too large. Instead, narrow it down to one sport, or even better, one team. Having a narrow focus allows you to fully understand and convey the story of that topic.

6 Decide your medium. Should your story be told in audio format with images or should you use video? Can you weave your narrative with only words and sounds, or do you need b-roll footage and other moving images? Think about your audience, your resources, and your interests as you decide.

Storytelling Rules

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=PLY6PCL9ylnRSaO608L0ocvzxusr_35XfC

Basic Story Structure

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.

The Three C's

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, beliefs, values, personality, psychology or mental or emotional state.

Choosing a Medium Audio vs. Video

Choosing which medium to use for your finished product could be one of the hardest choices you will make for this project. Below are a few things to consider while you are debating between an audio project or a video project.

Usability

Audio is one of the most easily consumed media in various environments. You can listen to audio while doing almost any activity. You don't have to be staring at a screen. Watching video requires a lot more attention than audio. You need to have access to a screen and dedicate your time solely to watching the video.

Cost

Because you need less equipment, it is less expensive to record audio than video.

Time

You only need to be concerned with sound elements for your final project, not visual elements, so it takes less time to record and edit the final project. When shooting for a video project, you are dealing with more equipment and have to worry about the visual as well as the audio elements of your project. Therefore it takes more time to record and edit a video project.

Complexity

Recording and editing video is a more complicated than audio with color correction, composition, video codecs, resolutions, frame rates, and more.

Data Management

Video files are large. Video projects are more challenging for data management than audio because they require more storage space than audio files.

Visuals

When done well, audio-only content can be dynamic and engaging, but it can't *show* users the story the way video can. Instead of spending time describing something in order to discuss it, video allows you to simply "show and tell." A person, concept, place, or thing can be brought more clearly to life as the audience can see those things. If you plan to do a lot of interviews, perhaps video would be best as video interviews can be more engaging than sound alone, and can convey other information like body language and expressions.

Flexibility

When you are recording for a video project, you are also recording high quality audio. You can always use that audio to create an audio-only project, but you can't do the same if you are only recording audio.

Purpose of the Content

Ultimately, the biggest question to ask yourself as you plan this project, is what is the goal of the project? Which medium will help you meet that goal?

Special Consideration

If you intend to create a mobile tour for your community, then think about the fact that people will be walking around looking at their surroundings. You won't need video since the visual will be right in front of them.

Place-Based Narrative

According to Pew Research Center, nearly two-thirds of Americans are now smartphone owners. When visitors come to your town, they will likely use their phones to navigate – finding places to stay, to eat, and things to do. Think about turning your project into a mobile or and digital experience that visitors and local alike can use to explore and learn about your town.

There are a variety of digital and mobile platforms out there that allow you to locate your stories on a digital map. - Even the platforms that do not allow location-based tagging, you can add some sort of location - whether it be an address, city, street, lake to its description. This way you can ensure that your listeners understand where this story is relevant, and are able to understand on a deeper level the context of the story.

One of the oldest ways of presenting place-based narratives is by using a tour- whether it is through a live tourguide or a recorded or written tour around a certain area.

A tour is a group typically exsiting of 10-15 stories connected by a common theme. Usually, a stop on a tour is between 1-3 minutes. Using the free and open platforms discussed later in this toolkit, you can create and publish geolocated content (content placed virtually in real life locations). The audio and video stories or tour stops should include walking and driving directions as well as text and images if you want your user to experience the entire collection as a tour.

Things to consider when developing placed based narrative:

- Are there physical locations connected to the historic and cultural stories you intend to create?
- Will you have more than one story or several story segments, so you can create several connected stops?
- Will your content be an appropriate length for a walking or driving tour?
- Will your content be in an appropriate format for a walking or driving tour? Audio is best for a mobile tour, though you can also use videos.

If you decide to create a tour, your completed stories will be location based. Keep those locations in mind as you plan and create your story projects. Also, remember that people will be likely be standing when listening to your stories - be kind to their feet and keep the stories short.

What if I only have one story?

If you only have one story, but you still want people to be able to hear it as they explore your town, you can still create a place-based narrative, and use the appropriate apps and maps. You are also able to create a physical installation at the location that is relevant to your audio.

Is this not possible, and users of your stories will likely not go to the location your content is about, you can- at least partly- recreate the environment using images, videos etc.

