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HOW TO TELL A STORY (A)

From an instant to eternity, from the intracranial to the intergalactic, the life story of each and every character offers encyclopedic possibilities. The mark of a master is to select only a few moments but give us a lifetime.

—Robert McKee¹

Stories are all around us. Stories move us, make us feel alive, inspire us to be more than we would be otherwise. As famed screenwriting coach and author of the screenwriting bible, *Story*, McKee says: “Story is not only our most prolific art form, but rivals all activities—work, play, eating, exercise—for our waking hours. We tell and take in stories as much as we sleep—and even then we dream.”² Our appetite for stories is a reflection of the basic human need to understand patterns of life — not merely as an intellectual exercise but as a personal, emotional experience. Alexander Steele, in *Writing Fiction* argues that we need stories as we need food. “Our curiosity, and perhaps insecurity, compels us to continually explore the who, what, where, when, and why of our existence. Some call this lofty goal a search for *Truth*.”³

Learning how to tell a story cannot guarantee the reaching of Truth, but it can help you connect with your audience, move your audience, and make your material more memorable.

Despite our love for stories, most of us leave stories to “storytellers,” artists in the storymaking fields such as fiction writing, screenwriting, and movie making. In general, we passively take in

¹ Ibid, p. 31.

² Robert McKee, *Story*, (Regan Books: 1997), p. 11.

³ Alexander Steele, editor, *Writing Fiction*, (Bloomsbury, New York), 2003, p. 2.

Victoria Chang prepared this case under the supervision of Professor Jennifer Aaker as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation. Contributors include Oren Jacob and Justine Jacob. Special thanks to Dana Maurello and James Forrest.

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their stories and are moved by the end product. But how many of us do not put much thought into *how* those stories are made, perhaps because we do not see the benefit of stories beyond entertainment? But what if we could move beyond PowerPoint slides and Microsoft Word memos and instead harnessed the energy of a story?

Traditionally, business people persuade using only the left side of the brain, or reason. However, persuasion occurs, just as much (if not more) through emotion. By developing the right side of the brain, engagement can be better built through “uniting an idea with an emotion.”⁴ And the best way to do this is by telling a compelling story.

THE ELEMENTS OF STORYTELLING

People are natural storytellers. “Stories have been implanted in you thousands of times since your mother took you on her knee. You’ve read good books, seen movies, attended plays. What’s more, human beings naturally *want* to work through stories. Cognitive psychologists describe how the human mind, in its attempt to understand and remember, assembles the bits and pieces of experience into a story, beginning with a personal desire, a life objective, and then portraying the struggle against the forces that block that desire.”⁵

However, this does not mean that telling stories is easy. Learning the basic elements of storytelling, in the same way a screenwriter learns how to tell stories, can help to make the task seem less daunting.

After learning the basic elements of storytelling, the task of the businessperson is to apply these principles to a specific and with a concrete goal. Ask yourself these questions: Who is the audience, and what is your goal in telling your story? Are you persuading someone to invest in your company? Are you trying to sell an idea to your co-workers? Are you trying to inspire people to help a cause, an individual, or save someone’s life?

The goal or the “meaning” of the story, and a deep understanding of the audience, need to be honed for the story to have maximal impact.

Characters

Characters are central to a story. They interact with or influence every part of the story. “Characters carry the reader from the first to the last page, making readers care.”⁶ The job of a storyteller is to bring characters to life, to reveal them, and to make other people care about them. “Deep within the protagonist the audience recognizes a certain shared humanity.... But there’s something about the character that strikes a chord. In that moment of recognition, the audience suddenly and instinctively wants the protagonist to achieve whatever it is that he desires.”⁷

⁴ “Storytelling That Moves People: A Conversation with Screenwriting Coach Robert McKee,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 2003, p. 6.

⁵ *Harvard Business Review*, op. cit., p. 6.

⁶ Brandi Reissenweber, “Character: Casting Shadows,” in Alexander Steele, editor, *Writing Fiction*, (Bloomsbury, New York), 2003, p. 26.

⁷ McKee, op. cit., p. 141.

When trying to find a story to tell, or in the process of telling a story about a person, it is essential to locate his or her desire or desires. “Desire beats in the heart of every dimensional character.”⁸ Strong characters need to want something. And storytellers need to identify what the characters want, and to communicate it in a way that an audience understands. Sometimes the characters’ desires are concrete (e.g., money, a cure for a sickness); other times abstract (love or personal growth). But a story cannot be told about a protagonist who doesn’t want anything, who cannot make decisions, whose actions effect no change at any level.

“Here’s a simple test to apply to any story. Ask: What is the risk? What does the protagonist stand to lose if he does not get what he wants? More specifically, what’s the worst thing that will happen to the protagonist if he does not achieve his desire? If this question cannot be answered in a compelling way, the story is misconceived at its core.”⁹ McKee argues that: “The finest writing not only reveals true character, but changes that inner nature, for better or worse, over the course of the telling.”¹⁰

Choosing characters that are under pressure will help your audience reach a deeper revelation.

Beyond identifying a character’s desire(s), you must reveal the character’s distinctive traits. It is easy to present a character’s most stereotypical qualities; however what makes a character most interesting is the character’s unique qualities—the unexpected qualities. These qualities are often revealed through illuminating and contrasting traits. “The best contrasts are so seamlessly sewn with the characterization that they’re not easy to spot; they seep into the characterization. The reader should experience the tension, not be spotting contrasts like stop signs along the road.”¹¹

Plot

Plot is a key element of a story well told. Whether it is a movie, novel, short story, documentary, or simply a story shared over dinner, plot is what moves the story along. It is the writer’s choice of events and their design in time: what to include, what to exclude, where to put events before or after other events. “To plot means to navigate through the dangerous terrain of story and when confronted by a dozen branching possibilities to choose the correct path.”¹²

A good plot is what keeps the audience interested and engaged—wondering what will happen next. It is the sequence of events that ultimately resolves the major dramatic question of a story.

How to create a good plot? As with mapping out a character, mapping out a plot requires an identification and understanding of the “major dramatic question” or the one thing a story is about (e.g., will he live or die, will she kick her drug habit, will he find a job, will she find her father?). This single dramatic question is the “central organizing force” in every story. In the case of fiction, the reason why readers keep reading is because “of the suspense the major

⁸ Reissenweber, op. cit., p. 26.

⁹ McKee, op. cit., p. 139-141, 149.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 104.

¹¹ Reissenweber, op. cit., p. 32.

¹² McKee, op. cit., p. 43.

dramatic question creates. We need to find out what the answer will turn out to be.”¹³ The answer to that question doesn’t always have to be a resounding “yes;” it could be a “no” or even an open-ended “maybe.”

Three elements work together to create a plot: the protagonist, his or her goal, and the conflict blocking that goal.

- The protagonist is the main character, the person to which the major dramatic question applies. Just as desire is essential to every character, desire is central to every plot.
- What the protagonist wants is the goal—or the answer to the major dramatic question. In the classic story of *The Catcher in the Rye*, for example, Holden Caulfield’s goal is to find a place where he belongs; and the major dramatic question of the book is, will Holden find a place where he belongs?¹⁴
- The conflict is the obstacle blocking the protagonist from his or her goal.

Storytelling Arcs

The arc is the shape of the story—the scaffolding of the story that holds the plot in place. The classic structure of a plot is one that McKee calls the “Classical Design.” The classical design refers to a story built around “an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change.”¹⁵ McKee calls the elements of classical design “Archplot,” which have dominated movies (e.g., *Citizen Kane*, *The Hustler*, *Men in Black*, *Thelma & Louise*, *A Fish Called Wanda*, *The Road Warrior*, *The Fugitive*, *The Godfather Part II*, and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*). See Exhibit 1.

Stories have beginnings, middles, and ends. In shaping a classically designed story, a storyteller needs to fulfill all three parts.

Beginning of Story. The beginning of a story should flow relatively quickly because the audience wants to get to the interesting stuff, to the action—in other words, to the middle of the work. The beginning has to accomplish three things: “it has to drop the reader right into the middle of the action, it has to provide all the necessary background information to get the reader up to speed, and it has to establish the major dramatic question.”¹⁶

Middle of Story. The middle of a story takes up the majority of space with the goal to do three things. First, the characters and situation we were introduced to in the beginning are developed. Second, the core action of the story happens here. Third and most

¹³ David Harris Esenbach, “Plot: A Question of Focus” in Alexander Steele, editor, *Writing Fiction*, (Bloomsbury, New York), 2003, p. 49, 55.

¹⁴ Esenbach, op. cit., p. 57.

¹⁵ McKee, op. cit., p. 45.

¹⁶ Esenbach, op. cit., p. 60, 63.

importantly, the middle section is where the protagonist's path toward his or her goal is blocked again and again by increasingly daunting obstacles, and where the forces arrayed against the protagonist become ever more powerful.¹⁷

The main barrier that a protagonist faces, the "inciting incident," radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life. The protagonist is forced to react to the inciting incident.¹⁸ Often referred to as the "big hook," the inciting incident captures the audience's curiosity and keeps the audience motivated to find the answer to the "major dramatic question"—all the way until the ending or the climax of the story. The inciting incident generally occurs in the first 25 percent of the story. McKee instructs: "Bring in the central plot's inciting incident as soon as possible...but not until the moment is ripe. An inciting incident must 'hook' the audience, a deep and complete response."¹⁹ In a late-arriving inciting incident, *Casablanca*, for example, the inciting incident occurs 32 minutes into the movie when Ilsa reappears in Rick's life. In this case, the story is filled with numerous "subplots" that occur side-by-side with the main plot or the love story that take up some of the first 32 minutes of the movie.

End of Story. The end of a story is often the shortest part of a story, but plays a critical role. McKee states: "A reverend Hollywood axiom warns: 'Movies are about their last twenty minutes.' For a film to have a chance in the world, the last act and its climax must be the most satisfying experience of all.... The first commandment of all temporal art is: Thou shalt save the best for last. The final movement of a ballet, the coda of a symphony, the couplet of a sonnet, the last act and its story climax—these culminating moments must be the most gratifying, meaningful experiences of all."²⁰

The end generally follows a "three Cs" pattern—crisis, climax, and consequences. "The crisis is the point where tension hits its maximum, and the climax is where the tension breaks, and where we get the answer to our major dramatic question. Then, the consequences, however briefly handled, are alluded to at the very end of the piece."²¹

Point of View

Point of view refers to the perspective through which the story is told. One point of view is the first person "I" perspective, where the story is narrated by a character, usually the protagonist. Choosing a first person point of view gives the advantage of intimacy because there is no barrier between the audience and the speaker. The audience can immediately get a sense of the speaker and his or her personality. The first person point of view can be limiting in its perspective, however, unless the story is also injected with a narrator or other first person perspectives.

¹⁷ Esenbach, op. cit., p. 63.

¹⁸ McKee, op. cit., p. 189.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 200, 201.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 107, 108.

²¹ Esenbach, op. cit., p. 66.

The second person point of view uses the pronoun “you” that addresses the audience. This point of view is challenging and can come off as being gimmicky. It is a more overt way of drawing an audience into the story, but using a different more subtle point of view might work better.

The third person point of view allows the narrator to illuminate a story’s events from various angles. There are several types of third person point of view. In the third person single or multiple vision, essential information is filtered through the consciousness of either one or multiple characters. In the third person omniscient point of view, the story’s information is filtered through the narrator’s all-knowing consciousness: “Through the omniscient narrator you have the ability to do any of the following: enter the mind of any or all of the characters, interpret the story’s events, describe incidents, unobserved by any of the story’s characters, provide historical context for the story, and inform the reader of future events.”²²

Show, Don’t Tell

When telling a story, one of the oldest rules in the art is to “show, don’t tell.” Granted, there has to be some exposition or simple relaying of factual information; there’s much to be said about the physicality of storytelling, the invocation of all of the senses. McKee details: “Master storytellers never explain. They do the hard, painfully creative thing—they dramatize.... A great story authenticates its ideas solely within the dynamics of its events; failure to express a view of life through the pure, honest consequences of human choice and action is a creative defeat no amount of clever language can salvage.”²³

Storytellers communicate visually. The best stories show the characters and their unshaved skin, what they are wearing, who their families are, or what the weather is like in their environment.

Beyond the visual sense, stories can employ other senses such as accent (the way a character speaks), sound (noises such as screeching tires or sirens within the character’s environment to convey a sudden sense of danger), or even smell (e.g., describing the smell of perfume). The most powerful way of capturing an audience and bringing them into your story is through sensory description.²⁴ And the more specific the description is, the better. However, do not overload your story with extraneous adjectives and adverbs (verbs that end in “ly” such as swiftly and gracefully). The best stories tend to use adjectives and adverbs sparingly, opting for more of a subtle approach to build tension.²⁵

One of the pitfalls to avoid when telling your story is clichés (e.g., it was a bone-chilling cold morning, or he wanted to get his feet planted firmly on the ground). Clichés have been used so many times that instead of being moving, they have become meaningless.²⁶ To win the war against clichés, take the time to learn about the setting of the story you are trying to tell, whether it is through memory, imagination, or secondary research.

²² Esenbach, op. cit., p. 90-91.

²³ McKee, op. cit., p. 114.

²⁴ Chris Lombardi, “Description: To Picture In Words,” in Alexander Steele, editor, *Writing Fiction*, (Bloomsbury, New York), 2003, p. 107.

²⁵ Esenbach, op. cit., p. 111.

²⁶ Esenbach, op. cit., p. 121.

Setting

Setting refers to the place or world in which the story occurs. Although plot and character often take precedence over setting, situating the reader is important. In fact, McKee argues that: "...the source of all clichés can be traced to one thing and one thing alone: *The writer does not know the world of his story.*"²⁷

How to convey the world of the story? The first step is to create a small, *knowable* world. "The constraint that setting imposes on story design doesn't inhibit creativity; it inspires it. All fine stories take place within a limited, knowable world. The larger the world, the more diluted the knowledge of the writer, therefore the fewer his creative choices and the more clichéd the story. The smaller the world, the more complete the knowledge of the writer, therefore the greater his creative choices."²⁸

Within the small world you are crafting, four dimensions can be used to make that world more knowable:

Period: story's place in time—contemporary world, history, or future.

Duration: story's length through time—how much time the story spans within the lives of the characters.

Location: story's place in space—geography, town, streets, buildings, rooms, or planet.

Level of conflict: story's position on the hierarchy of human struggles—personal, institutions, environment, etc.

Theme

Theme answers the deep-rooted question: "What is your story about?"

The answer is not the superficial answer of "this happened," then "that happened." Rather, the theme is the center of a story, the heart of it, the deeper meaning-- the message. A story without a theme can lead an audience to ask: "So what?"

Theme is often referred to as the "controlling idea" which describes how and why life undergoes change from one condition of existence at the beginning to another at the end. For example, in *Groundhog Day*, the controlling idea is that "happiness fills our lives when we learn to love unconditionally." In *Dangerous Liaisons*, the controlling idea is that "hatred destroys us when we fear the opposite sex." The controlling idea is the purest form of a story's meaning, the how and why of change, the vision of life the audience members carry away into their lives.²⁹ See Exhibit 2 for distinct themes.

²⁷ McKee, op. cit., p. 67.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 71-72.

²⁹ McKee, op. cit., p. 117.

Although every great story must have a theme (otherwise, the audience will leave with an empty feeling), it is also possible to focus too much on the theme—to the point that the theme is rammed down the audience’s throat. To avoid this trap, start by telling a story and avoid starting with the theme.³⁰ The theme will make itself known at a later point—and if it does not, the storyteller needs to think about why he or she was drawn to tell the story to begin with. In many cases, as debasing as it sounds, a story can be crystallized into a word such as “courage,” “truth,” “addiction,” “longing,” “hope,” “death.”³¹

Good themes are simple. In *The Great Gatsby*, the theme is “the corruption of the American dream.” In *Lolita*, the theme is “the power of desire” In *1984*, the theme is “a police state like this could happen.”³²

Good themes are also personal. “Hemingway was fascinated with the question of how to face death. After he witnessed the suicide of his father, it became the central theme, not only of his writing, but of his life.... Charles Dickens, whose father was imprisoned for debt, wrote of the lonely child searching for the lost father over and over in *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Great Expectations*....”³³

FINDING STORIES

One of the challenges of storytelling is to first *find* a story. The easiest way to find a story is to begin by asking questions and interviewing people, creating a ‘story-bank.’ McKee says: “When people ask me to help them turn their presentations into stories, I begin by asking questions...and amazing dramas pour out. But most companies and executives sweep the dirty laundry, the difficulties, the antagonists, and the struggle under the carpet. They prefer to present a rosy—and boring—picture of the world. But as a storyteller, you want to position the problems in the foreground and then show how you’ve overcome them. When you tell the story of your struggles against real antagonists, your audience sees you as an exciting, dynamic person.”³⁴ McKee adds: “The great irony of existence is that what makes life worth living does not come from the rosy side. We would all rather be lotus-eaters, but life will not allow it. The energy to live comes from the dark side. It comes from everything that makes us suffer. As we struggle against these negative powers, we’re forced to live more deeply, more fully.”³⁵

In the end, storytelling is about understanding the self: “Self-knowledge is the root of all great storytelling.... The more you understand your own humanity, the more you can appreciate the humanity of others in all their good-versus-evil struggles.”³⁶ See Exhibit 3.

A STORYTELLING TEMPLATE

³⁰ Bain, op. cit., p. 202.

³¹ Bain, op. cit., p. 203.

³² Terry Bain, “Theme: So What’s Your Story Really About?” in Alexander Steele, editor, *Writing Fiction*, (Bloomsbury, New York), 2003, p. 198.

³³ McKee, op. cit., p. 99.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 7.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 7.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 8.

Although stories vary in many ways, a storytelling template can help you frame your own story. One useful formula is:

Story = Situation/Desire - Complication/Obstacles - Solution/Outcome

Other tips to help you build your story (see also Exhibits 4 and 5):

- a) Get the audience's attention fast. One way to do so is to begin the story *where the audience is*. According to Andy Goodman: "This is your story's 'hook'—the description of a place, circumstance, or premise that everyone understands and with which they readily identify."³⁷
- b) Focus on the protagonist or the character. Ask yourself what the protagonist desires, leading to the major dramatic question of the story. It is important to personalize the protagonist, make the protagonist seem real so the audience begins to feel a personal stake.
- c) Hone in on the problems, barriers, or the antagonists that are keeping the protagonist from achieving his or her desire. "The people in your story have to want something."³⁸
- d) What would you like the audience to do? You might need to identify the kind of action you want the audience to take or identify how they can help. By the end of your story, the audience should feel compelled to help or to take whatever action you would like them to take because they now have a personal stake in helping to find a solution. For example, in the Chemcorp example above, the protagonist or the CEO would like investors to give him money. Even in a more closed-ended story where the protagonist acts and his or her true character is revealed, there could still be a need for a call to action.
- e) Keep stories short (3-5 minutes each).
- f) Place stories strategically in an introduction to warm up, in the middle of your talk to punctuate, and at the end to summarize and to bring the audience to action.
- g) After your talk is over, the audience should be able to answer, "What was the story all about?" in just a few sentences.

STORYTELLING IN BUSINESS

In an interview with the *Harvard Business Review*, McKee provides an imaginary example of how a business person could use stories to convince investors to take action and invest in an imaginary company called Chemcorp. He argues that: "You emphatically do not want to tell a beginning-to-end tale describing how results meet expectations. This is boring and banal. Instead, you want to display the struggle between expectation and reality in all its nastiness."³⁹ Instead of taking the standard route of showing slides that explain how Chemcorp has discovered a chemical compound that prevents heart attacks, rife with market size charts and growth figures,

³⁷ Andy Goodman, *Storytelling as Best Practice*, p. 16.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 38.

³⁹ *Harvard Business Review*, op. cit., p. 6.

McKee provides an alternative and advocates personalizing the story. He says: “Alternatively, the CEO could turn his pitch into a story, beginning with someone close to him—say, his father—who died of a heart attack. So nature itself is the first antagonist that the CEO-as-protagonist must overcome. The story might unfold like this: In his grief, he realizes that if there had been some chemical indication of heart disease, his father’s death could have been prevented. His company discovers a protein that’s present in the blood just before heart attacks and develops an easy-to-administer, low-cost test.”⁴⁰

In the middle of the story, the protagonist or the CEO faces a stream of additional barriers or antagonists—the next one being the FDA who turns down the first application. But new tests show better performance and the FDA approves a second application. However, Chemcorp faces a series of other antagonists, from running out of money to management issues as a partner leaves. McKee adds: “This accumulation of antagonists creates great suspense. The protagonist has raised the idea in the bankers’ heads that the story might not have a happy ending. By now, he has them on the edges of their seats, and he says, ‘We won the race, we got the patent, we’re poised to go public and save a quarter million lives a year.’ And the bankers just throw money at him.”⁴¹ For more on story-telling in business, see Exhibit 6.

WITH STORIES, YOU CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

Armed with the techniques of storytellers, you may have begun to see the power of stories to change lives and the world. As McKee says: “I still believe that art transforms life. But I know that if you can’t play all the instruments in the orchestra of story, no matter what music may be in your imagination, you’re condemned to hum the same old tune.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 6-7.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 7.

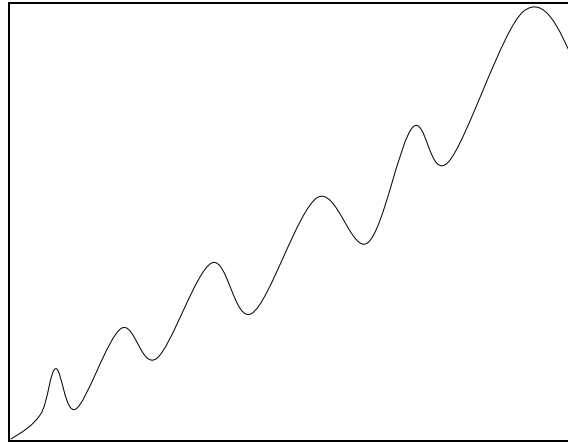
⁴² McKee, op. cit., p. 10.

Case Discussion Questions:

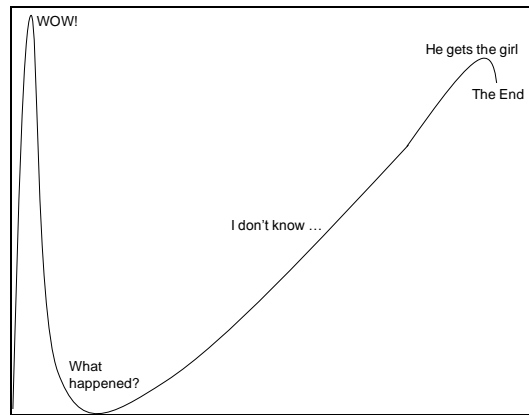
1. For practice at storytelling, watch *Casablanca*. Identify the plot and subplots. How did the subplots contribute to the overarching story? What does the protagonist, Rick, desire? Identify the major dramatic question in *Casablanca*. Finally, create a graphical representation of parts of a story/ story arc to accompany your text.
2. Think about the last three times that someone told you a story and you started to personally care about the characters in the story, and become personally involved. List the reasons why.
3. Identify a cause (one or more person) that you are passionate about and tell its/his/her/their story.
 - a. Describe your protagonist's qualities, personality traits, and physical characteristics. Identify your protagonist's desire.
 - b. Write an outline of your story and plot your story. Identify your protagonist(s) major dramatic question. Identify the barriers or antagonists that block the protagonist from achieving his or her goal.
 - c. How might you end your story and if you desire action from your audience, have you compellingly told your story in a way that clear action comes through?

Exhibit 1 Story Arcs

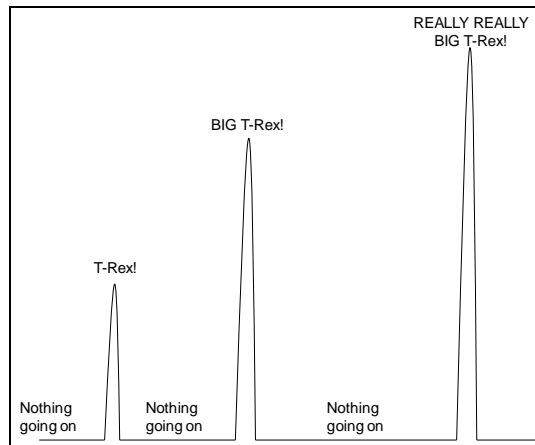
Casablanca



James Bond



Jurassic Park



Source: Jennifer Aaker.

Exhibit 2

Story Types and Underlying Themes

Historical Narrative	“We have a history that makes us proud, and we want to apply our high standards to the current situation.”
Crisis	“We have to respond to the danger facing us.”
Disappointment	“We made a decision based on the best information we had available, but now we know it wasn’t the right decision, so we have to try something else.”
Opportunity	“We know something now that we didn’t know before, which presents us with a new possibility if we act.”
Crossroads	“We’ve been doing fine on the path that we’re on, but now we have a new choice and we have to decide which path to take.”
Challenge	“Someone else has achieved something amazing, do we have it in us to do the same?”
Blowing the Whistle	“Although it appears everything is going fine, we have a serious problem we need to fix.”
Adventure	“We know that trying something new is a risk, but it’s better to take a risk than to stay in a rut.”
Response to an Order	“We’ve been told we have to do this, so we’re here to figure out how to make it happen.”
Revolution	“We’re on a path to disaster if we don’t radically change what we’re doing today.”
Evolution	“If we don’t keep up with the latest, we’ll fall behind.”
The Great Dream	“If we can only see our possibility, we can make it our reality.”

Source: H. M. Boettinger, *Moving Mountains*.

Exhibit 3 **How to Find Good Stories**

Tim Keelan knows how to find a good story. For the last three years, Fortune 500 companies have been hiring Keelan to “mine” their stories so the best practices they contain can be shared and used widely. Keelan’s firm, StoryQuest, which he started in 2003 with one employee (himself) and a steadfast belief in the power of storytelling, now boasts clients such as Lucent Technologies and projects revenue for 2006 of \$1 million.

Keelan spends his days interviewing business people, carefully editing their stories, and producing CDs or downloadable audio files that clients circulate internally (for training) and externally (for marketing and promotion). Along the way, he has developed several reliable techniques for digging out and polishing good stories—techniques you can employ to produce some gems of your own.

When Keelan begins work with a new client, he will often hear the familiar refrain, “But I don’t know any good stories!” He just nods and presses forward. “People don’t know their own stories,” he says with a hint of exasperation. To help clients dig deeper inside their own head, Keelan employs several techniques that will jog their memory and shift them into storytelling mode.

Don’t Accept “We”

Before conducting one-on-one interviews, Keelan lays down the law: “I insist they tell their story first person.” Too often, he explains, storytellers hide behind the word “we,” which makes it difficult to discuss exactly who did what in the course of a narrative. By forcing storytellers to say “I,” Keelan makes them carefully consider when *they* are driving the action as opposed to someone else. Invariably, this leads storytellers to identify other players in their tales, and those names go on a list of follow-up interviews. In most cases, by the time he has talked to the follow-ups (as well as their follow-ups), Keelan has heard all sides of the story.

Look for Moments of Vulnerability

Typically, a StoryQuest client will ask Keelan to interview its sales people to capture stories that illustrate effective ways to bring in new customers. After hearing dozens of such stories, Keelan has discovered that the most engaging ones have a common element: they do *not* chronicle a straight line to success. Instead, the salesperson admits to some kind of misstep or outright mistake while pitching to a prospect. And it’s precisely this moment of vulnerability, Keelan asserts, that creates empathy for the storyteller and lends authenticity to the story. “When people are willing to share something vulnerable,” he says, “the audience will be more likely to trust them.”

Push for Quotes and Details

Just as he won’t accept “we,” Keelan does not allow clients only to give him the gist of conversations that occur within their stories. If an interviewee tells him, “And then the boss

asked why I was late for the meeting,” Keelan will gently press for the exact words until the storyteller adds, “Well, what he actually said was, ‘Where the hell have you been?’” Even without an expletive, direct quotes usually enliven a story, so they are worth pursuing. Similarly, Keelan will ask about small details that seem insignificant to the storyteller—the weather that morning, the name of the restaurant where the meeting was held, what the prospect was wearing—because these can fix a story in time and place, paint a more vivid picture, and give it a more authentic feel.

Do Some Time Traveling

Keelan will also does interviews by drawing a line on an easel pad, placing a mark in the center, and drawing arrows on either end. The mark, he tells the client, is today. To the left is the past. To the right, the future. He then hands over the marker and asks the clients to make additional notations on the timeline to indicate significant events in the organizations history as well as achievements that still lay ahead. Noting historic events, Keelan says, will often prompt stories that had not surfaced during previous interviews. And when clients start thinking about the future, this can tease out additional stories from the past where the moral is, “If we can do more of *that*, we can reach this goal.”

Source: Andy Goodman, *Storytelling as Best Practice*, pp. 28-29

Exhibit 4

Seven Questions to Sharpen Your Stories

1. **Who's the protagonist?**
 - Just as a car needs a driver to get where it's going, stories need someone to drive the action. Traditionally structured stories follow protagonists in pursuit of clearly defined goals.

2. **What's the hook?**
 - Another technique for drawing people in is beginning the story *where the audience* is. This is your story's "hook"—the description of a place, circumstance, or premise that everyone understands and with which they readily identify.

3. **What keeps it interesting?**
 - "The stuff of storytelling," says Robert McKee, a renowned Hollywood script doctor, "is the grasp between what we think will happen when we take action, and what actually happens." Take another look at that success story of yours and see if you can recall any barriers or surprises that cropped up along the way.

4. **Where's the conflict?**
 - There is no drama without conflict, and comedies, for that matter, also fall flat without it. Heroic action always comes into sharper focus when juxtaposed against villainous misdeeds.

5. **Have you included telling details?**
 - A single, telling detail can replace a paragraph or more of description, and good stories have just enough telling details to set the scene and people it with colorful characters.

6. **What's the emotional hook?**
 - The audience wants an emotional experience that makes the time worthwhile. In return for their time and attention—an increasingly valuable commodity, not so incidentally—they expect more than a recitation of facts.

7. **Is the meaning clear?**
 - Finally your story should have a crystal clear moral, a reason for taking this particular journey.

Exhibit 5 The 10 Immutable Laws of Storytelling

1. **Stories are about people.** Even if your organization (a) is devoted to saving flora and/or fauna, (b) toils in the dense thicket of policy change, (c) helps other organizations work more effectively, human beings are still driving the action. So your protagonist has to be a person. And since this person also serves as the audience's guide through the story, it's essential to provide some physical description.
2. **The people in your story have to want something.** A story doesn't truly begin until the audience knows precisely what the protagonist's goal is and has a reason to care whether or not it is attained. Do this within your first paragraph or two.
3. **Stories need to be fixed in time and space.** The moment you begin telling your tale, the audience will want to know when and where it is taking place. If you help them get their bearings quickly, they will more readily follow you into the deeper meaning within.
4. **Let your characters speak for themselves.** When characters speak to each other in a story, it lends immediacy and urgency to the piece. Direct quotes also let characters speak in idiosyncratic voices, lending authenticity to the dialogue.
5. **Audiences bore easily.** Within the first paragraph or two, you have to make them wonder "what happens next?" or "how is this going to turn out?" As the people in your story pursue their goal, they must run into obstacles, surprises, or something that makes the audience sit up and take notice.
6. **Stories speak the audience's language.** According to national literacy studies, the average American reads at a sixth grade level. So if your ads, posters, and publications are meant for mass consumption, plain speaking is the order of the day.
7. **Stories stir up emotions.** Human beings are not inclined to think about things they do not care about. Stories stir emotions not to be manipulative, not simply for melodramatic effect, but the break through the white noise of information that inundates us every day and to deliver the message *this is worth your attention*.
8. **Stories don't tell: they show.** Your audience should see a picture, feel the conflict, and become more involved with the story.
9. **Stories have at least one "moment of truth."** The best stories show us something about how we should treat ourselves, others, or the world around us.
10. **Stories have a clear meaning.** When the final line is spoken, your audience should know exactly why they took this journey with you. In the end, this may be the most important rule of all. If your audience can't answer the question, "What was the story all about?" it won't matter if you followed rules one through nine.

Exhibit 6

Storytelling within Your Organization

Storytelling within your organization can be inspiring and unifying or demoralizing and divisive. The outcome is entire up to you.

In her book *Corporate Legends and Lore: Storytelling as a Management Tool*, Peg Neuhauser recommends identifying a ‘Story Bank’, or group of stories that can be your organization’s unifying force. These stories will vary from group to group, but will generally include:

- How the organization was founded, including the need for your work
- Emblematic victories that demonstrate the organization’s effectiveness over time
- What-we-learned-in-defeat story (if only to remind your team that occasional misfires are inevitable and should be embraced with what they can teach you)
- An employee performance story (to shows the commitment your people bring to a challenge)
- One or more stories about the fundamental nature of the problem you are tackling

Once you have collected these stories, look for regular opportunities to share them with your team and identify the best people to tell them. The objective is to find people to (a) bring the stories to life, and (b) share them often enough that any member of the staff can tell them.

And what about those not-so-happy tales already circulating in the hallways? Considering how intrinsic storytelling is to human communication—and how we learn—managers interested in greater organizational effectiveness should pay more attention to the inside stories. In them, they may find the answer to internal problems, but it won’t be as easy as digging out and telling the good stories while squelching the bad. Organizations with healthy cultures, strange as it may sound, purposefully tell both.

Source: Andy Goodman, *Storytelling as Best Practice*, pp. 12-13

For Further Inspiration

Moving Mountains

By H. M. Boettinger

Leader's Guide to Storytelling

By Stephen Denning

The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations

By Stephen Denning

Slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations

By Nancy Duarte

The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture

By Robert Fulford

Storytelling as Best Practice

By Andy Goodman

Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations

By Melanie C. Green, et al.

Listening is an Act of Love

By Dave Isay

Telling True Stories

By Mark Kramer & Wendy Call

Improving Your Storytelling

By Doug Lipman

The Power of Personal Storytelling

By Jack Maguire

Corporate Legends & Lore: The Power of Storytelling as a Management Tool

By Peg C. Neuhauser

What If? The Art of Scenario Thinking for Nonprofits

By Diana Scarce & Katherine Fulton

Tell Me a Story: Narrative & Intelligence

By Roger Schank

The Story Factor

By Annette Simmons

The Art of Storytelling: Easy Steps to Presenting an Unforgettable Story

By John Walsh