

Storytelling

Storytelling is one of the most important tools available to communicators to help them convey a message. People learn, remember and understand the best through story. Leo Widrich, co-founder of [Buffer](#), writes on his blog post “The Science of Storytelling” that evolution has wired the brain for storytelling. Storytelling is how we communicate what we value the most.

Story Arc

Story Arc refers to the shape a story takes as it moves from the beginning to the middle and then to the end. Also known as Aristotle’s Narrative Arc and as Freytag’s Pyramid, story arcs have, at a minimum, an inciting moment, rising action, a climax and a resolution. Story arcs may also have the following: exposition, complications, falling action, and a dénouement.

Elements of the Story Arc

The **exposition** portion of a story arc is where the scene is set, characters introduced and any needed background information is provided.

The inciting moment is a single event that signals the main complication and starts the rising action.

Rising action is the build-up of events that drive the story to the climax.

Complications are the challenges the subject faces as the story moves towards the climax.

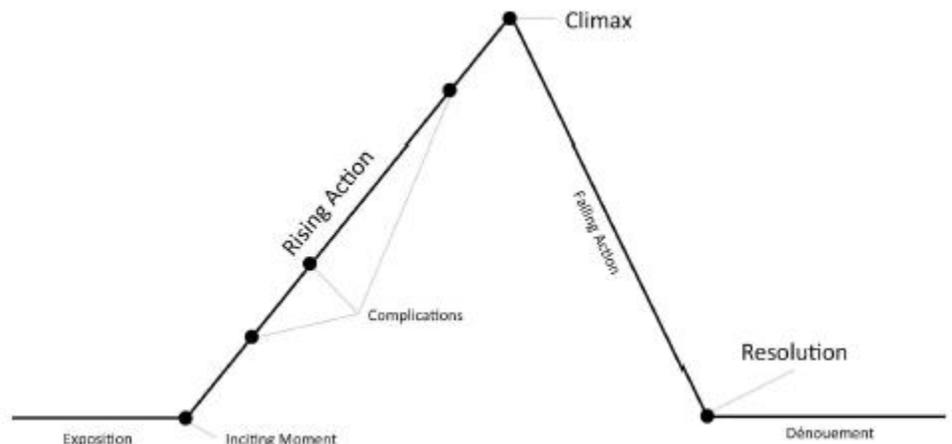
Complications can be internal struggles or external forces the subject attempts to overcome.

The **climax** is the moment the story has been building towards. It is typically the critical and deciding moment of a story.

Falling action is the part of the story that covers the fallout caused by the climax. It also signals the end of the story is coming soon.

Resolution is the part of the story where the main conflict or issue is resolved.

The **dénouement** is the ending of the story where any remaining questions can be explained.



Storytelling Concepts

Setting

Setting is the time, place and location a story takes place within and helps set the mood of a piece.

Scene

A scene is a sequence of actions revealed to move a story closer to the climax or to reveal points essential to the story's overall theme.

Character

A character is the person responsible for the thoughts and actions in a story. Characters help tell the story through their actions, dialogue, mannerisms, appearance and thoughts.

Point Of View

Point of view is the camera position of a story. In literature there are three types of point of view:

1. **First person.** First person point of view is where the author/producer shows the story from their position. "I did this. The snow fell on me. My dog barked."
2. **Second person.** Second person point of view is where the author/producer shows the story as if the reader/audience is the main character. "You did this. The snow fell on you. Your dog barked."
3. **Third person.** Third person point of view is where the author/producer shows the story through an outsider's point of view. "The Sailor did this. The snow fell on the Sailor. The Sailor's dog barked." Third person omniscient is a third person point of view where the thoughts of every character are known to the reader/audience. "I can't believe the Sailor did that," the Chief thought. Third person limited is where the thoughts of a single character are known.

Point of view also refers to the direction or viewpoint of a story and the distance a story is told from.

- **Direction/Viewpoint.** Point of view direction refers to which viewpoint the story is told. Will the story be told from a single character or from direction of a group of characters? Will the story be told from the viewpoint of the character who receives the action or from a character who watches the action unfold? These are decisions each producer/writer must select in order to tell the best story in the best possible way.
- **Distance.** Point of view distance refers to how close the producer or writer places the audience to the story. According to Jack Hart in "Storycraft", writers can put the audience extremely close to the point of view to vividly show a character's experience, thoughts and emotions. "But, as you step back from the action, you reveal more context, encompassing more abstract elements of reality that involve all of us." He added that when the author steps back from the action, the piece is written in summary narrative and when the author closes in the distance and gets close, the writing shifts to scenic narrative.

Point of View Examples

A story about a ship pulling into port can be told from many points of view.

First person. “I ironed my dress blues, shined my black shoes and rolled my white dixie hat just the way I liked it. I wanted to look sharp as we manned the rails and pulled back into port after being gone for half a year.”

Second person. “You iron your dress blues, shine your black shoes and roll your white dixie hat just the way you like it. You want to look sharp as you man the rails and pull back into port after being gone for half a year.”

Third person (Omniscient or Limited). “The Sailor irons his dress blues, shines his black shoes and rolls his white dixie hat just the way he likes it. He wants to look sharp as he mans the rails and pulls back into port after being gone for half a year.”

Direction/Viewpoint. The direction/viewpoint of this story could be told from the point of view of a Sailor aboard the ship getting ready to pull back into port. It could also be told from the point of view of a Sailor standing watch as the ship enters port and watches everyone disembark and be greeted by loved ones on the pier. And it could also be told from the point of view from a family member or friend on the pier waiting for their Sailor. Each shift in viewpoint changes the story told even though they are all about the same event.

Distance. If the producer/writer wanted to tell this story using in the summary narrative form the point of view could be of a long shot of all the Sailors lining the ship at parade rest. “Sailors aboard USS This Ship manned the rails as the ship entered port after a six-month deployment.” If the producer/writer want to this story using scenic narrative, the point of view could be from a single Sailor talking on the phone telling her loved-ones on the pier where she was standing. “Do you see the missile launcher on the left side of the ship? I’m just above it and the flight deck. I’m waving,” Fireman Ima Sailor told her Mom. “Do you see me yet?” Distance changes in a story allow the producer/audience to more fully tell a story.

Dialogue

Dialogue is a conversation between people. It is a storytelling device used in movies, plays and in fiction and narrative non-fiction. Dialogue is not direct quotation. “Dialogue involves the reader more completely than any other single device,” Tom Wolfe in his introduction to *The New Journalism*.

Description

Description is the strategy of using sensory details to portray a person, place or thing. There are two types of description: Objective and Impressionistic.

Objective Description

“Objective description attempts to report accurately the appearance of the object as a thing in itself, independent of the observer's perception of it or feelings about it. It is a factual account, the purpose of which is to inform a reader who has not been able to see with his own eyes.”
(Kane and Peters, 1986)

Impressionistic description

“Impressionistic description is very different. Focusing upon the mood or feeling the object evokes in the observer rather than upon the object as it exists in itself, impressionism does not seek to inform but to arouse emotion. It attempts to make us feel more than to make us see.” (Kane and Peters, 1986)

Photographer Jay Maisel said, “You are responsible for every part of your image, even the parts you’re not interested in.” Everything that is visible in the frame should communicate a singular idea. Everything that distracts from the idea should be left outside the frame when the shutter falls.

It is up to the reporter, then to take in all of the elements that fall within the framework of the story and to provide the detailed description to establish context. You could tell the reader a Sailor carried tie down chains across the flight deck, or you could tell the reader the Sailor carried 102 lb. tie down chains designed to secure a seven ton aircraft.

Where the first description says a Sailor works hard, the second description illustrates the challenge and importance of that work.

Storytelling Color

According to Jack Hart in his book “A Writer’s Coach”, well-chosen detail can reach people in ways generalizations cannot. “Abstract writing can inform and persuade,” writes Hart. “But it cannot bring readers to genuine sadness, or horror, or euphoria.” Detail – storytelling color – can do that though. Hart added that there’s a physiological reason for the power of detail. “Abstract thinking originates in the cerebral cortex, the highest and most recently evolved part of the brain. But emotion emerges from the ancient core of the brain as a direct result of external stimulation. Because descriptive writing that’s rich in telling detail can approximate experience, it can also reproduce a human being’s emotional response to experience.”

Be precise with details to make the story vivid. Are you describing a ship or a 9,200-ton guided-missile destroyer? The details will bring your story to life, but can, when executed poorly, disrupt the pace of the piece. Use the details that are necessary to your story’s theme to propel it along and incite an emotional response from your readers. If the added description doesn’t meet either of those requirements, edit it out.

Theme

Theme is the common thread or repeated idea that is incorporated throughout a story. It is the bigger and deeper meaning the author/producer wants to convey. Themes tend to be universal in nature and provide relatable concepts and ideas that everyone understands at some level.

“Theme is the glue that allows an audience to invest in the story, to feel that the story is in any way important, to respond emotionally to the story in any authentic, lasting way. Theme is the element that, if executed properly, makes audiences want to see the film again and want to have all their friends see the film to experience what they experienced. No other element, no matter how sound, can do that. The biggest spectacles fail to drive that kind of emotional response and expanding interest without strong theme.” (Deer, 2014)