

Storytelling: Communication & Engagement

Stories are a creative and imaginative tool with which to inform and inspire others. They engage our senses and emotions as well as our intellect. They foster our capacity for empathy – the ability to see the world from someone else’s perspective.

At it’s simplest a story is *an account of imaginary or real people told for entertainment*. Every good story is made up of three key components:

1. **Characters:** give your character an overarching desire and then put obstacles in the way of them getting it. This creates conflict and we all engage with conflict because we all experience so regularly. How they respond to conflict demonstrates their character. For example, don’t just tell us they’re clever, show us them doing clever things.
2. **Plot:** here structure is crucial, knowing where your story starts and ends and the key scenes that take us from one to the other. Setting the scene is key – where we are, who is there and what is at stake. One screenwriting adage is to “arrive late and leave early”, i.e. take us to the action and the most interesting moments – doing this will affect the pace of your story. For example, if you have limited time you might have to go straight to the key moment and cut back on scene setting but if you have longer you can experiment with how many scenes you include. And remember, because humans are addicted to and dependent on causality, every time you describe an event the audience will be trying to work out how it fits into the larger story arc, so how you place scenes and moments next to one another is vital. The key is to get your audience asking, “What happens next?”
3. **Detail:** use all the five senses to bring scenes to life so your audience can holistically imagine the world of your story. Emotional details can enrich a story but it’s also worth having a go at describing the emotion – i.e. how would you describe someone being afraid using only the five senses? Leaving space for your audience to do some of the imaginative work can deepen their engagement with your story.

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Stories and storytelling skills have broad applicability in the world of public communications.

- When writing **case studies** and **short form journalism** it might mean finding the best structure for your piece: using a good hook as a first sentence/title, giving a brief overview in the first paragraph, and then having a coherent narrative arc throughout the rest of the piece. It also means being realistic about how much can be conveyed in a limited space, so rather than bombard your reader with details limit yourself to one or two take home points that the piece can focus on.
- In **long form journalism** it means finding the characters and stories that will bring your piece to life. For example, it might not be enough to simply relay the details of an interesting scientific discovery, you might also have to tell the stories of the people involved – what inspired them to do this work, what their experience of doing the work was like, their motivations, fears, hopes etc. People love finding out about other people (aka gossip!), so those human details will really bring your piece to life.
- In **social media** it means understanding where each tweet, facebook post etc fits into the larger narrative of your work. Is it a simple, meme-type tweet that you want shared? Is it a facebook post that is designed to take readers to a longer piece? Also, as the name suggests, social media is about establishing online relationships with others, whether they are your audience or other practitioners in the same field. It's important to discover what other stories are out there and how you can connect with them online.

The most important aspect of all of the above is the **audience**. Always know who you are communicating to, what level of expertise they have, what they are interested in and, perhaps most importantly, what they *care* about. Use the tools of empathy to relate to different audience members and then cater your communications appropriately whether they are experts, non-experts, students, academics, prospective students, avid museumgoers etc.

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It is often said that the best stories are about love and power. These themes certainly appear universal in stories across times and cultures. We can use these themes to help people swiftly engage with our stories and the people in them, whether they're a scientist who cares deeply about the work they're doing, or an A-Level student nervous at the prospect of an interview at Oxford University, or a graduate student unsure about what career path they want to follow. All these stories are linked by the themes of love and power, as are all of our own stories, and the easier we make it for audiences to connect with our stories the more deeply they will engage with them. E.M. Forster said it best, "only connect".

What next? Please do email me at hello@robertholtom.co.uk - I am happy to provide a free half hour Skype/phone call to talk more about storytelling and how it can be of use to you. I also run a range of workshops for groups (from two hours to whole days) as well as one-to-one training - www.robertholtom.co.uk