

LEADERSHIP|ISSUES

April 25, 2016

Stories can change the way we think, act, and feel. Stories can capture our imaginations, illustrate our ideas, arouse our passions, and inspire us in a way that cold, hard facts often can't.



Story frames that work at work in your business

By John C. Horton

People tell stories at work to communicate and connect with employees, customers, colleagues, partners, suppliers, or even the media. Work or business stories differ from regular stories, in that you tell them to illustrate a point, perhaps with an objective, goal, or desired outcome in mind, rather than for entertainment.

Everyone tells stories. Stories existed long before recorded history. Human life is narratively grounded; we have always had stories to interpret our experiences, construct our lives and shape our world. Stories are universal, adaptive, and foundational to the human experience. We think in narrative structures, remember facts in story form, and share memories as stories.

In stories, we can see, sense and experience what others have experienced. We can discern/appreciate/understand the characters, feel the weight of their challenges, and their triumphs and tragedies. Stories can drag us low or lift us high; they can make us laugh – or cry; they can shock or soothe; they can teach, preach or reach; they can show and tell; and done well, they are “sticky” and become our own.

Cooking up a good story

Like a good recipe, a good story has certain “ingredients” that must be part of the mix for it to be a success. And, as with cooking, there are often several recipes for a given “dish” – changing somewhat to fit the occasion or need.

“I know what happened, what I want done, but I don’t know how to tell a story.” The temptation is to give “tips” on telling better stories, such as:

- Listen – The best storytellers are also the best listeners. Give others your full attention when they tell a story.
- Practice – Rehearse your story *before* you tell it.
- Create an experience – Try to “speak” to all five senses with your story.

But, the real need is how to structure or frame a story so that it makes sense, is interesting and does what it is supposed to do. In other words, the recipes? Coming...

Before we start, don’t get the ideal you have to create *War and Peace* for every story occasion. The shortest complete story I know is falsely attributed to Hemingway: “For sale: baby shoes, ever worn.” Brevity works at work (though perhaps not as brief as the baby shoes story).

The Story Spine

The Story Spine was created by playwright Kenn Adams in 1991. I heard about it from Dan Pink in his book, *To Sell is Human*. Pink notes that every Pixar movie follows the same pattern. Since they’re a movie studio with an unprecedented record of hit movies from great stories, it’s worth analyzing. Here’s the framework:

- Once upon a time there was . . .
- Every day, . . .
- One day, . . .
- Because of that, . . .
- Because of that, . . .
- Until finally, . . .

Let’s follow Pink’s lead and try it with *Finding Nemo*:

Once upon a time there was a widowed fish named Marlin who was extremely protective of his only son, Nemo. **Every day**, Marlin warned Nemo of the ocean’s dangers and implored him not to swim far away. **One day** in an act of defiance, Nemo ignores his father’s warnings and swims to the open water. **Because of that**, Nemo is caught by a diver and ends up as a pet in the fish tank of a dentist in Sydney. **Because of that**, Marlin heads off for a journey to recover Nemo, enlisting the help of other sea creatures along the way. **Until finally** Marlin and Nemo find each other, reunite, and learn that love depends on trust.

CAR framework

[Paul Smith](#), is a man on a mission; a mission to make the world a better place, one story at a time. In his book *Lead with a Story*, he introduces us to the CAR framework.

Context

Context provides the background information that listeners or readers need to make sense of your story. It should also spark their interest and make a connection, so that they care about what you have to say.

Context needs to address four key questions:

- Where and when does this story take place?
- Who is the main character? – This needs to be someone who your audience can connect with.
- What does he or she want? – Explain what your main character wants to accomplish.
- Who, or what, is in the way? – Every story needs an obstacle or villain. This can be a person, an event, or a challenge.

Action

Every great story has action: ups and downs, setbacks, conflicts, failures, and battles. The action is where we experience defeats and learn lessons.

In your story, your main character must “do” something. Ideally, he or she will experience a setback, failure, or problem along the way. Obstacles create tension and forge an important connection with your audience, because everyone experiences obstacles.

Result

At the end of your story, you reveal your main character’s fate. You also need to explain, subtly, what the audience should have learned from this result. What is the moral? Why did you tell this story?

Six kinds of stories you should know how to tell

According to [Annette Simmons](#), author of *The Story Factor* and *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*, “Story is the DNA of all meaning –nothing is important without the story you tell yourself about it.” She believes these stories encompass the heart of all communication.

1. **"Who-I-Am" Stories** – These stories explain who you are as a person. They tell others about your dreams, goals, accomplishments, failures, motivations, values, or history. “Who-I-am” stories are essential to build trust. Tell these stories when you join a new team, or when you need to establish a connection with a stranger.
2. **"Why-I-Am-Here" Stories** – “Why-I-am-here” stories communicate why you’re here, and their aim is to replace suspicion with trust. People want to know, “What’s in it for me?” but they also want to know, “What’s in it for you?” These stories explain that you don’t have a hidden agenda, and that you’ll both get something fair out of the situation.

For example, people may be asking themselves if you are passionate about what you do, or are you financially motivated? And are you here for the right or wrong reasons?

You can use "why-I-am-here" stories in fundraising, sales, and situations when you need to build trust quickly, or where you want to reassure someone that you're on a level playing field.

3. Teaching Stories – Teaching stories create an experience that transforms listeners or readers. They show how a change in their behavior, perspective, or skills can lead to meaningful results.

You can also use teaching stories to illustrate a situation, such as a best- or worst-case scenario.

4. Vision Stories – Vision stories inspire people, and encourage them to feel hope or happiness. Here, you convince your audience that their hard work and sacrifice is worth the effort. You need to link their actions to a specific, valuable, and worthy outcome. Use vision stories when you need to motivate people to change their behavior. They can inspire people to overcome the frustrations, obstacles, and challenges that come with change, so that they can achieve a worthwhile goal or ideal.

5. Values-in-Action Stories – Values-in-action stories reinforce the values that you want your audience to demonstrate or think about. These stories can be positive or negative. For example, you can tell stories that demonstrate integrity, compassion, and commitment, or tell ones that highlight attitudes that you don't want to see - for example, cynicism, a slapdash approach to quality, or a weak work ethic.

6. "I-Know-What-You-Are-Thinking" Stories – "I-know-what-you-are-thinking" stories allow you to address others' objections, suspicions, questions, or concerns before they voice them. With these stories, you need to anticipate your audience's point of view, so you choose a story that deals with their unspoken concerns.

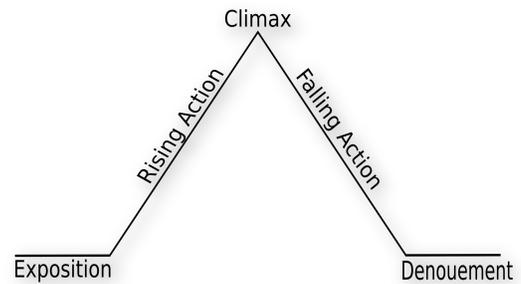
When you tell this type of story, you validate the audience's perspective or worries. This allows them to feel that you're on their side, and that you identify with their emotions. These kinds of stories are valuable in sales, negotiations, or pitches to key stakeholders.

Dramatic Structure

Plays first originated in ancient Greece. Aristotle was one of the first to write about drama and describe its three segments: beginning, middle, and end. Over time, dramas evolved. The Roman poet, Horace, advocated for

five acts, and many centuries later, a German playwright, Gustav Freytag, developed the five-act structure commonly used today to analyze classical and Shakespearean dramas.

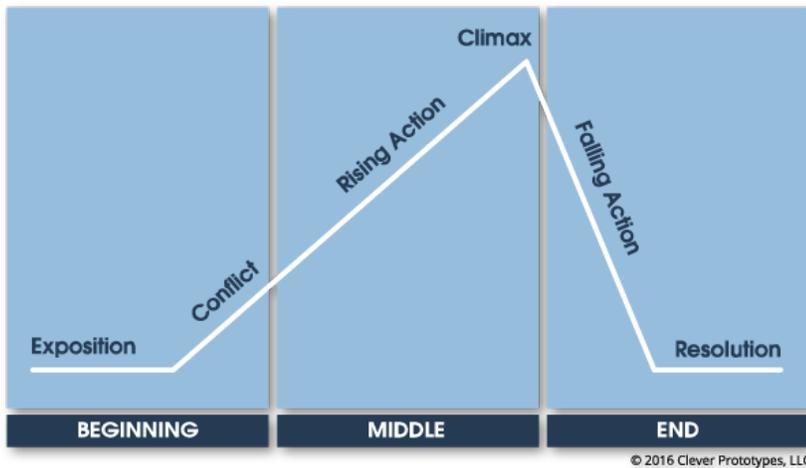
Freytag's Pyramid.



Dramatic Structure (Freytag's Pyramid)	
Format	MacBeth
<p>Act 1: The Exposition Here, the audience learns the setting (Time/Place), characters are developed, and a conflict is introduced.</p>	<p>Act 1: The Exposition Setting: Scotland, at a war's end Characters: Macbeth and his friend Banquo are introduced. Conflict: Three witches have brewed an evil plot involving Macbeth, and they tell him that he will be king!</p>
<p>Act 2: Rising Action The action of this act leads the audience to the climax. It is common for complications to arise, or for the protagonist to encounter obstacles.</p>	<p>Act 2: Rising Action Macbeth and his wife kill the King and take the throne. They go on a tyrannical killing spree. The action rises as the audience sees how ambitious Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have become.</p>
<p>Act 3: The Climax This is the turning point of the play. The climax is characterized by the highest amount of suspense.</p>	<p>Act 3: The Climax Macbeth holds a banquet and sees the ghost of Banquo (who Macbeth had killed). Lady Macbeth becomes mentally unstable, and the couple begins to fear the consequences of their murderous deeds.</p>
<p>Act 4: Falling Action The opposite of Rising Action, in the Falling Action the story is coming to an end, and any unknown details or plot twists are revealed and wrapped up.</p>	<p>Act 4: Falling Action A rebellion is instigated by Macduff to restore the throne to Duncan's exiled son. Macbeth learns another set of prophecies from the witches and begins to think he will be saved.</p>

Dramatic Structure (Freytag's Pyramid)	
Format	MacBeth
Act 5: Denouement or Resolution This is the final outcome of the drama. Here the author's tone about his or her subject matter is revealed, and sometimes a moral or lesson is learned.	Act 5: Denouement or Resolution The three witches' predictions come true, and the castle is stormed. Macbeth is killed.

As we learned, Aristotle believed that every piece of poetry or drama must have a **beginning, middle and end**. The simple three-act structure has seen a revival in recent years, as it has been adopted by cinema blockbusters and hit TV shows. The graphic below merges dramatic structure and Aristotle's simple model.



The KISS Principle and the STORY Acronym

After all this, please remember the KISS Principle – keep it simple and specific. Your ideas, described in specific, concrete terms, are almost always more effective. The same holds true for crafting and telling stories. “A story has to be about specific people and events” not a vague idea or generalization.

You can use the acronym **STORY** to guide your thinking:

- Who is your hero (the **S**ubject)?
- What he/she is searching for (the **T**reasure e.g. solution to a problem)?
- What **O**bstacles does he/she encounter? (Creates tension, action.)
- What are the **R**esults and lessons learned?
- Wh**Y** are you telling the story in the first place?

Made to Stick

Brothers Chip and Dan Heath wrote a best-selling book in 2007, *Built to Stick; why some ideas stick and others die*.

They sought to explain what makes an idea or concept memorable or interesting.

The book's outline follows the acronym "SUCCE~~S~~" (with the last **s** omitted). Each letter refers to a characteristic that can help make an idea "sticky":

- **S**imple — find the core of any idea
- **U**nexpected — grab people's attention by surprising them
- **C**oncrete — make sure an idea can be grasped and remembered later
- **C**redible — give an idea believability
- **E**motional — help people see the importance of an idea
- **S**ories — empower people to use an idea through narrative

While their outline ends with “Stories” this list could easily and effectively be another story frame in your arsenal.

What works for you?

Our brains are far more engaged by storytelling than by hard facts. When reading data, only the language parts of our brains work to interpret the meaning. But when we read a story, not only do the language parts of our brains energize, but also any other part of the brain that we would use if we were actually experiencing what we're reading about becomes activated as well.

What suits your need? Your style? Whether you prefer the Story Spine, the CAR Framework, Simmons' Six Stories, Dramatic Structure, KISS and STORY, Built to Stick, or something else altogether different, you can put stories to work at work, in your business.

Tell Stories. Make connections. Make a difference. So, what's your story? 🗣️

John Horton is an advisor to senior managers at CollierBrown&Co. His ambition is to help you achieve yours. Whether advising, coaching, or just having coffee, his work is simple: everything he does is designed to improve your business.

404.250.0092

www.collierbrown.com

