



STORYTELLING FOR AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION TO STORY

Storytelling is central to our experience as humans. It defines the world around us and gives meaning to seemingly random events. In order for us to comprehend phenomena, primitive man created myths and legends (stories) to make sense of them. As our storytelling became more advanced, stories developed moral lessons, which helped shape attitudes in societies. Our very existence is interpreted as a story through a sequence of events we tell people we meet.

The story theory RNTC practices was first explored by Aristotle (300 BC) in his work "Poetics" a meditation on the structuring of classical Greek Tragedy and Comedy¹. The theories were later expanded by Gustav Freytag². The techniques of storytelling are not new humans have been sharing stories as long as we have been communicating.

STORY DEFINITION

There are many interpretations of story and storytelling. Many believe 'Story' to imply 'Fiction'. Story is not fiction. Fiction (or Drama) is a type of story.

Robert McKee, considered the greatest screenwriting teacher defines story as:

*"An imperfect protagonist, who, in an attempt to improve his/her life, sets off on a quest towards a physical goal but along the way is met by a series of physical obstacles of ever increasing difficulty. Ultimately the character overcomes their central flaw (imperfection) thus can achieve the goal of their quest."*³

Story includes events (things that happen in a logical progression) and characters (actions that happen to an imperfect hero) forcing the character to learn something (and therefore share a lesson with the audience).

A simple definition for our purposes could be

"Something that happens (events) to someone (character) that teaches us something (moral premise)."

JUST THE FACTS PLEASE, THEN 5W'S AND AN H

Traditional communication and journalism bases its structure on the 5 W's and the H (What, where, who, when, why, how?). It concerns itself with facts and structures these facts into a style of "The inverted pyramid". The inverted pyramid style originated through a technological limitation. Telegrams were used to relay important information over great distances, due to the unpredictability of the line connection, important facts needed to be transmitted first. It would always be "Headline" then the essential information. The basic facts were then transposed into the structure of the triangle, if additional information was received. Similarly publishers of newspapers could simply cut the story shorter at any point after a lead, to fit the story within the physical pages of the Newspaper.

The inverted triangle started as a print structure but as radio popularity grew, newspaper journalists moved to newsrooms in radio, using the structure they were familiar with in the

1 Butcher, S.H. 1902. Poetics of Aristotle edited with critical notes and translation, Third Edition. Macmillan, New York.

2 Freytag, G. 1863. Die Technik des Dramas, Scholars Choice Edition.

3 McKee, R. 1997:24. Story, Structure, Substance and the Principles of Screenwriting. HarperCollins. Los Angeles.

broadcasts. Later as television developed in the 1950's, the inverted pyramid structure was used in news programme construction due to radio journalists making the switch to television. In the 2000's similar migrations of journalists happened to the online space and social media. However, for the first time, audiences were able to choose what they wanted to consume, instead of being force-fed it through the broadcast media. The result was dwindling profits of news-based organisations and favourable uptake in media that was relevant, emotionally engaging and had a story quality to it.

PERSUASION IS LEARNING WITH EMOTION

RNTC uses the 'Persuasive Storytelling Methodology'. This simply means that content is made to reach an audience through story with lasting impact. The 'persuasion' is learning (adopting new knowledge skills or attitudes) through logically structuring information and providing emotion that is relevant to the audience we wish to reach.

Research continues to show the link between story and fact retention, where facts without story are easily forgotten, story is remembered accurately for a longer period of time. The story also provides a framework for remembering key facts and information and therefore most people can repeat the story with accuracy. A good example of this is Islam's Holy book the Qur'an. The book survives because the stories in it were passed down orally and accurately remembered by groups of devotees.

There are three parts to persuasive arguments: A credible source (someone we trust), a logical approach (starting at a point we recognise as true, with information we have currently and moving us towards new information in a logical way) and, emotional Appeal (through which we experience emotion).

The basic assumption of the Persuasive storytelling methodology is that one needs both logical information and emotion to be able to bring your target audience new Knowledge, Skills or Attitudes. Great stories carry emotion and they teach us something.

THE EIGHT ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

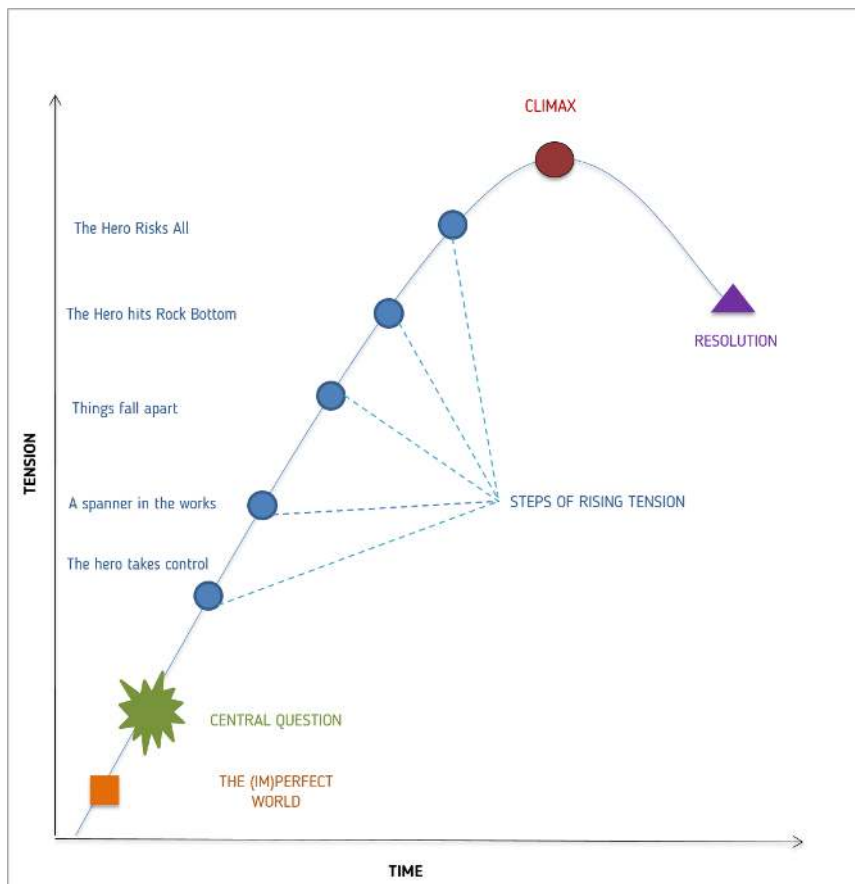
There are 8 essential elements to building a story. Humans enjoy stories that follow this basic structure and we have become very good at applying this structure to our stories. The elements build tension, meaning that we want to find out what happens next.

In the age of the 'attention economy' where it is no longer a given that people will pay attention, storytelling is vital to ensure the audience is pulled to the end of the story in an engaging way. While the story elements seem like a Hollywood formula, they can just as easily be applied to journalism, documentary making or any format including interview. If you were to explore the Pulitzer winning journalism over the last 4 years you will quickly notice a new trend in the style of the winning reports, investigations and coverage: story.

The 8 Essential elements are:

1. Tension and Time
2. The (Im)perfect world
3. The Central Question
4. Steps of Rising tension
5. Climax
6. Resolution
7. Symbol
8. Universal Truth

Each of these are explored in detail below. The following is a graph that illustrates the "Arc of Tension" a visualization of the eight essential elements.



1. TENSION & TIME

Tension is the feeling an audience has of trying to figure out what happens next. A story requires the tension to build, so our want to find a solution to the problem posed in the story gets greater and greater as the story progresses. As humans are problem-solving creatures, we want to be confronted with a problem that we wish to solve, we make an assumption about how the problem will be solved and then we see if our assumption is correct. This causes tension in the viewer. A simple example is in horror films, where the innocent are being chased by a monster of some sort, the tension that is created is if the hero will make it out alive.

The rule about story tension is that tension must rise. We do not like stories that go no-where or stories that have very low tension.

Time relates to story time. A story may happen in a few minutes or may take decades. What is important is that the period that is chosen must have maximum tension. Can the story best be told linearly (as it happens in progressive time) or is it more suspenseful to tell the story in a series of flashbacks? Stories can move linearly or in backwards and forwards in time but whatever you chose, it must be to make the audience have a sense of tension and make them want to know 'what happens next'.

2. THE (IM)PERFECT WORLD

All great stories start by showing us a perfect world. Even if the world we enter into as the audience is not a perfect world, for the people in the story it is a perfect world. This is usually when we, as an audience, are introduced to a flawed character.

In the *Great Gatsby*, (F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1925) the perfect world is Gatsby's lavish parties and over-the-top wealth and excess. In the film "Titanic" (James Cameron, 1999) the perfect world is Titanic setting sail from South Hampton towards New York with fanfare and applause.

In dramatic writing, it is at this point when we learn the characters flaw. A psychological crutch that they must overcome. It could be pride, as in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, in which both lead characters must overcome their bull headedness. The characters flaw usually makes it very difficult for them to progress through the story. Until they learn to overcome this (usually in the climax of the story), will they succeed.

The perfect world ends when a central question is introduced.

3. A CENTRAL QUESTION

The central question is a yes or no question. It is "Will the Hero win the heart of the girl?" "Will James bond defeat the bad guy?" "Will the pirate find the treasure?" "Will the murderer be brought to justice?"

Once the perfect world has been introduced, we need to be confronted by a problem or quest that the hero must solve. This is sometimes called an "Inciting Event" a point in the story where something happens that turns the characters world on its head. This can be the hero bumping into a woman who immediately attracts him (will the guy get the girl?), or it could be a spy meeting an evil adversary that gets away (will the hero catch the bad guy?). Whatever the inciting event it establishes the central question. The character MUST respond. It is a call to action and there is NO going back.

This question will draw the audience to try and find the answer through the story. The answer will be given in the climax but until the climax of the story, the viewer must ask himself or herself what could happen next?

A central question is encoded early on in the story. Even in feature film making the central question usually happens in the first minutes of the film. In your story ensure that you have a clear central question that your audience wish to answer. Usually the question is simple but intriguing enough for the audience to wish to solve.

4. RISING TENSION

Rising tension is events that the character responds to. Humans like twists and turns and stories that have challenges that the hero faces. A good story presents lots of obstacles. We want to see the hero try and fail, try and fail and try again until they succeed. Imagine a central question: will the hero get out of the burning room, then our character walks to the door and without any impediment, exits. This story has great potential for “what happens next” and tension. But without obstacles in the way (steps of rising tension), we feel cheated and disengage from the story.

When doing an interview of an Olympian for instance, the most exciting elements are usually the failures the interviewee faced before becoming a champion. These are the moments of rising tension. For the purposes of understanding rising tension.

For the purposes of clarity, let's consider the story of Lance Armstrong, 7 time winner of the Tour de France. Armstrong started competing in cycling at 16. In 1996 Armstrong was diagnosed with Testicular cancer and following the treatment and remission of his cancer went on to win 7 Tour de France Yellow Jerseys. In 1999 he was accused of doping in an attempt to win. He denied the doping, ending the careers of a number of athletes who brought allegations against him. In a 2013 interview with Oprah the biggest question was “will Armstrong confess, and if yes, will he be remorseful?”

Rising tension has a number of steps within it. These steps have a simple structure

› **The hero takes control**

The character tries to overcome the challenge that is presented by following their fixed pattern responses. The character tries but will fail.

Lance Armstrong denies the allegations, accusing others of cheating and using substances. He suggests that the whole cycling world is embroiled in doping and that if he were doping, the doping would be standard.

› **A spanner in the works**

This is the first failure. The character fails and their flaw is made even more apparent.

A book called “L.A. Confidential” (Pierre Ballester and David Walsh: L.A. Confidential – Les secrets de Lance Armstrong, 2004) is released explaining how Armstrong used and forced other members of his team to use performance enhancing drugs. They reveal how prescriptions were backdated on corticosteroid. A drug that is banned but is sometimes contained in creams that are used to treat wounds. Armstrong claimed he used a cream to treat saddle sores and hence the prescription.

› **Things fall apart**

The character tries again, the problem gets worse, the character fails again.

The United States Anti-doping Agency (USADA) does an investigation using new technology on old samples of Armstrong's blood from as early as 1999. These all test positive for high tech performance enhancing drugs.

› **The hero hits rock bottom**

This is the lowest point in the characters development. It is at this point where the character fails completely and seems like they cannot overcome the challenge.

All allegations are proven to be factual. Armstrong pleads no contest to the allegations. He is stripped of his 7 wins. His foundation, The Lance Armstrong Foundation, remove him from the helm renaming itself “Live Strong”. Armstrong is hit with several lawsuits including those for endorsements he received.

› The hero risks all

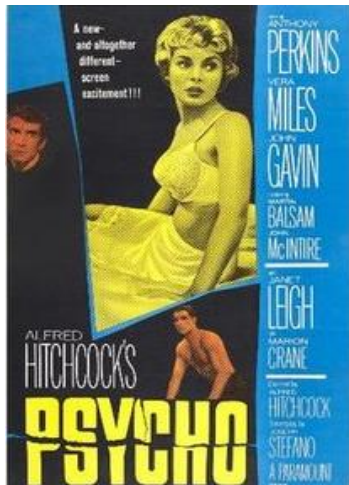
It is at this point where the character overcomes their character flaw. If they are proud, they must learn humility. If the character is impulsive, they usually learn patience. It is in this moment where they risk everything and try something new, using a different strategy. In most James Bond films the hero no longer has fancy gadgets or weapons. He must outsmart the bad person using only his wits.

In the case of Lance Armstrong: Armstrong appears on Oprah and tells his side of the story, confessing to years of doping to stay ahead. He candidly tells the talk show host how he did it and why he did it, coming clean. He puts his pride aside.

5. CLIMAX

The climax is the answering of the central question. It is the moment in the story in which the character is rewarded or punished for adopting new behaviours; it is a moment of irreversible change. In this part of the story we learn the answer to the question we have been waiting for in the story.

A climax proves or disproves the assumption the audience makes at the start of the story. In some instances, the climax may be shocking or may be expected. However, it is important to have a clear climax in the story. The climax should answer the central question. While this may seem obvious, it is a common mistake that the climax provides an answer to a completely different story. Consider the plot of “Psycho”.



In Alfred Hitchcock's famous psychological thriller “Psycho”, (1960) the lead character Marion Crane (Vera Miles) is embroiled in an affair with a married man. He cannot leave his wife as he cannot afford the costs of a divorce. On a Friday afternoon Marion is tasked with going to the bank for her boss who hands her an envelope full of money. Marion decides to steal the money and drives across country. On the journey, she contemplates whether to return the money. After a day of driving, she becomes tired and pulls off the highway into The Bates Motel. The motel is not busy as the freeway was built a distance from the Motel. The owners are: the quirky Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) and his mother (whom we never see). Marion rents a room and turns in for the night. She decides to return the money. While she is having a shower that evening, an unknown assailant breaks into her room and murders her. Norman, seeing the murder blames his menacing mother and disposes of the body and the money (unknowingly). In the remaining 60 minutes of the film, Marion's sister tries to find her and discovers her sister's murder and murderer.

The director starts with a question “Will Marion Crane and Sam be together (and hence keep the money she has stolen)? In the climax, when Marion is murdered, the answer is “NO’. Therefore, the story, is complete for the most part. The director then starts a completely new question “Will they discover who murdered Marion Crane?” These are in fact two completely different stories.

6. RESOLUTION

A resolution is the consequences of the story. Usually the hero is rewarded and the antagonist is punished. Order is restored and a new perfect world is established. The most common ending in

fiction is “And they lived happily ever after...” to conclude the world of the narrative. This is created to give the audience a concluding emotion.

A resolution shows the reward the character has earned and demonstrates a positive or negative emotion in the audience for what has been learnt.

7. SYMBOLS

A symbol is not a structural component of story. Rather it is a story device. A symbol in story is more than symbol in language. A story symbol has specific requirements and is defined differently than something that is “symbolic”.

A symbol is a name, a place, an object or anything that:

- › Has meaning beyond itself.
- › The meaning of the symbol changes from the beginning of the story to the end.
- › The symbol is culturally understood.

A story could be told entirely through a powerful symbol.

MEANING BEYOND ITSELF

A symbol should have more meaning than what it is. For instance, a wedding ring. A wedding ring alone is simply a circle of gold or precious metal that is worn on a finger. However, we give a wedding ring more meaning than itself. For instance, a wedding ring symbolizes trust, commitment, honesty, forever and love.

Very many things are SYMBOLIC, meaning that they have meaning beyond themselves, but for them to be story symbols that meaning needs to change through the story.



THE MEANING CHANGES

The meaning of a symbol needs to change from the beginning to the end of the story. The meaning encoded changes. For instance, in the case of the wedding ring, if the meaning at the beginning of the story is that of love, trust and commitment a story must be introduced to change the symbol to that of lust/indifference, distrust and betrayal. For instance:

A woman sits on the edge of a her bed. She twirls a wedding ring on her finger. In the adjoining bathroom, we hear the shower turn off and a man whistling a tune. The woman removes her wedding ring and places it in a bedside drawer. The man emerges from the bathroom in a towel and sits beside the woman on the bed. He smiles at her and they begin to kiss.

In this simple story, the wedding ring changes its meaning from trust to betrayal and from love to lust. While there is no overt statement of what is happening in this story, as the audience we understand it clearly.

CULTURALLY UNDERSTOOD

Good symbols have meaning that is shorthand for an audience. The target audience will have its own symbols that are specific to them and loaded with meaning. This meaning is the current

agreed reality for the audience i.e. what they currently know. Through the story you may use their own symbols to challenge them and bring them new knowledge, skills or attitudes.

In the case of the wedding ring, this symbol is understood by many people across the world. But in India for instance some cultures use a Bindi (a colourful dot on the forehead) or a nose ring to symbolize marriage. The symbol would be lost on this audience.



8. MORAL PREMISE

In our definition of story we defined a story as a “Something that happens to someone that teaches us something”. The moral premise is the something we learn as the audience. It is usually attitudinal and based on an emotional shift. The moral premise is the deeper meaning of the story. It is what the audience is left with at the conclusion and is usually a strong argument and an attitudinal lesson.

Moral Premise is constructed from Moral + Premise.

- › **Premise is:** An argument: a group of statements all of which support or provide evidence for each other and the conclusion.
- › **Moral:** The principals of right and wrong, the practical lesson.

The moral premise differs from the symbol in that it is universal. The moral premise aims to provide a framework for merging character and event and in making a story meaningful to an audience. The moral premise is defined as

[The moral premise is]... what the story is really about, is the message or the moral statement... it is a natural law, an absolute truth, for any person anywhere, throughout time. The moral premise is the truth upon which your story is based, is the identifying element of an audience of millions”.⁴

To state it plainly the moral premise is what the story is really about.

BINARIES

To understand a moral premise one must understand binary values. Binaries are opposites for instance darkness and light or hatred versus love. All story works on the simple premise of a binary. If there is a death at the start of the story, we expect that there will be a birth of some sort at the end. As audiences we have become astute at this pattern and therefore come to expect it. Some of the earliest stories used binaries as ways to differentiate change. If one examines most myths and legends they have strong binary codes. At the start the hero is weak and then becomes powerful (or the reversal of this).

Binaries are usually EVENT narrative or “something that happens”.

Negative	Positive
Darkness	Light
Death	Life

⁴ Williams, S, 2006. pg. 111. The Moral Premise: Harnessing Virtue and Vice for Boxoffice Success. Michael Wiese Productions.

Hate	Love
Loneliness	Togetherness
Weakness	Strength

VICES AND VIRTUES

Linked to the binary code, which is based on the events “what happens”, the Vice and Virtues are the character story “something happens to SOMEONE”.

Vices are the flaws of the character that they need to overcome. Virtues are the opposites of the characters flaws. They are the desired qualities the character must learn. In most fiction the antagonist usually has the virtuous qualities at the start of the story that the hero wants.

Vice	Virtue
Fear	Courage
Shamelessness	Modesty
Anger	Patience
Pain	Pleasure
Cowardice	Confidence
Distraction	Focus
Rudeness	Friendliness

STRUCTURING A MORAL PREMISE

A moral premise is essential to guide a story. Every event and every character choice is the result of the moral premise. What is it that you want to leave your audience with? What is the take away?

Your moral premise is the combination of the Moral and the Premise in structuring your argument.

The typical structure is

Sometimes...

*[VICE] leads to [Undesirable Consequences/ defeat] but
[VIRTUE] leads to [desirable Consequence/success]⁵*

In the case of the film “The Shawshank Redemption”

*“Sometimes, Fear leads to hopelessness and punishment but
Hope leads to happiness and freedom”.*

In the case of Shakespeare’s “Macbeth”

*“Sometime Greed leads to guilt and death but
Giving leads to innocence and life.”*

⁵ Williams, S, 2006. pg: 62. The Moral Premise: Harnessing Virtue and Vice for Boxoffice Success. Michael Wiese Productions