

Telling the Right Story to the Right People at the Right Time

Module 3: Creating Your Story Arc

LTER Network Communications Office
February 2017
Jai Ranganathan & Marty Downs

Stories provide context for science and make the core message more memorable and engaging ([Dahlstrom, 2014](#)). From the great epic poems to today's digital storytelling, narrative provides both a structure and an emotional attachment that helps the human brain to retain more information, recall it more easily, and act on it more readily. Stories elicit greater understanding, trust, and sympathy for your ideas, whether told by African bush tribes ([Wiessner 2014](#)) or political candidates.

Audience (module 1) and message (module 2) are the 'who' and the 'what' of your communications strategy. In this module, we deal with the 'how.'

Ideas that stick, according to Chip and Dan Heath in their (highly recommended) book *Made to Stick*, have six key qualities, corresponding to the mnemonic SUCCEsS. Memorable ideas are:

- Simple
- Unexpected
- Concrete
- Credible
- Emotional
- Stories

'Story,' I have noticed, is an often-recommended but seldom-explained goal in science communications. In this module, we will explore some of the established tools of narrative: character, setting, conflict, suspense, and resolution -- and try to apply them to the central message developed in the second module.

Character and setting, after all, are just ways of making a description more concrete. Conflict, suspense, and resolution engage readers' emotions and generate surprise.

So what IS a story, anyway? At its core, a story takes the reader, listener, or viewer on a journey. It may be a physical, emotional, or metaphorical journey. It will almost certainly involve a change -- often in the protagonist, sometimes in the world through which she travels.

Think about one of your favorite childhood stories. You can still remember it, right? Who is the hero? Can you see him? Where does she come from? What challenge does he face? What changes?

The answers to those simple questions are the key elements of narrative. With them, you have a story. Without them, you have well, maybe an explanation.

Take one of our favorites, “Where the Wild Things Are” by Maurice Sendak.

Max is lonely and a bit mischievous. Sendak shows us that by having Max parade around in his wolf costume. Many of us identify with him, which makes us pay better attention to the story.

We don’t see his home in much detail at first, but the land of the wild things is full of vivid detail. Max fears for his life when he arrives, but -- through his own cleverness -- becomes the king of the wild things (one unexpected change). Then, he learns that being the king is lonely and frustrating. He returns home with a new appreciation of his loving family (second unexpected change). Sendak conveys the love of his family through a single, concise detail (a hot dinner).

All the elements of story in a book that’s a mere 384 words!

Here’s a real-life example of an ecologist using this story approach to increase the effectiveness of her science message. Her research focused on monarch butterflies, which require milkweed plants to survive. She found that the planting of non-native milkweed species - poisonous to monarch caterpillars - in her study area was having a massively negative impact on monarch population sizes. Consequently, the goal of her science communication was to inform local gardeners that they should plant only native milkweed species.

The heroes of her story are a band of beautiful monarch butterflies flying through a perilous land, with danger at every turn. After a heroic odyssey, they arrive at their destination, where many inviting stopping points await. However, the danger is not over yet, as some of these inviting places are traps waiting to poison the unsuspecting band. Where will the monarchs end up? The answer to this cliffhanger depends on the local gardeners who can save them or lead them to their doom.

ASSIGNMENTS

Please upload your exercise stuff into the Google+ community for the class. If you don’t have much time to work on these exercises, it’s not a problem. Shorter is usually better anyway.

Exercise 1. Elements of story.

Dig back into your memory for a story that moved you and write down those key elements. Who is the hero?

- What does he look like? How do you know she's the hero? What details told you?
- Where does she come from? How does it feel? Warm, welcoming, confusing, threatening?
- What challenge does he face? Physical, emotional, knowledge?
- What changes? Her? Her world view? The world around her?

Exercise 2. Tell me a story. About anything.

Make something up or tell your lab-mate what happened on your ride into work. But remember the key elements. It happened to a specific person...in a specific place. How much can you convey with just a few details? Let one or two details represent many others, the way a warm dinner represents home and safety.

What happened? What changed? If nothing changes, it's probably not a story.

Get brave and tell the story to an actual, live person. See if you experience it differently.

Exercise 3: Applying story.

Take your message from module 2 and incorporate it into a story. Work through the elements one by one. There may already be a story there that just needs to be uncovered.

If you find it difficult or a full narrative style wouldn't be appropriate for how you are thinking of conveying the message, try just slipping one element into the mix. Is there a specific character or place that plays a central role? Bring it to life with concrete specifics.

Maybe your transformation is just learning that it's harder to measure decomposition than you thought. Science is full of change. Every disproven hypothesis has a story of change behind it.

It's not always possible to use all of these tools in a given communications effort, but as you try them out, I think you'll find that they add a new depth and dimension to your science communication.

Have fun with it. See you on February 22 or 24.

Cheers,
Marty and Jai