



HOW TO TELL A STORY

— BY —
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INTRODUCTION

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Why does story matter?

There are many definitions for the term story. Everybody from Plato to Weird Al Yankovich has chimed in. If you're reading this eBook, though, you're likely not looking for a philosophical definition. You're likely wanting to know how a good story works, why it captivates the brain, and perhaps, how you can learn to tell one. If so, I'm glad. That's the stuff I'm interested in too.

Whether you're a speaker who wants to compel an audience, a business owner who wants to tell the story of your business, a writer who wants to write a novel or a parent who wants to send your kids to bed dreaming of other worlds, this eBook is designed to help.

Psychologist Uri Hasson of Princeton University spent a season observing the brain images of people as they listened to and watched stories unfold. His 2008 study revealed that while watching television, our brains are far from inactive, depending on what we're watching. While watching a ten-minute clip of a Sunday Morning concert in New York's Washington Square Park, only a five percent stimulation response was noticed in their subjects' cortex. But when Hasson showed them Alfred Hitchcock's film *Bang! You're Dead*, his subjects elicited a 65% response. Stories cause the brain to come alive.

Last year people spent more than 490-billion dollars at the box office. What this means is we hunger for stories the way we hunger for food. Stories are a recurring commodity for which demand will never be fully satisfied. Just because we can't see and touch stories doesn't mean they can't be bought and sold. George Lucas sold his Star Wars plot lines and characters to The Disney Corporation for 4-billion dollars. But what did he sell? He sold a napkin on which an idea had been scribbled. He sold a fictional universe of his imagination. In fact, in the contract to Disney, Lucas sold the names of more than 30-thousand non-existent planets. What did he really sell? He sold a story.

Stories do more than entertain, though. If you want people to understand and identify with a complicated concept, tell a story about it. Telling a story often creates a "clicking experience" in a person's brain allowing them to suddenly understand what someone else is trying to say. As such, those who can tell good stories will create faster, stronger connections with others.

The power stories have on the brain is beginning to be understood by businesses. A recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* spoke of stories as the future of marketing, and for good reason. Keith Quesenberry, a lecturer at Johns Hopkins Center for Leadership Education spent a season studying the effectiveness of over 100 Super Bowl commercials. He successfully predicted the commercials that told the clearest story would be the most likely to go viral. And he was right. A Budweiser commercial featuring a puppy who made friends with a horse, a 30-second spot that could almost be considered a movie plot condensed into a beer ad, got more traction than any ads featuring scantily dressed women or humorous pranks. “People think it’s all about sex or humor or animals, but what we’ve found is that the underbelly of a great commercial is whether it tells a story or not,” Quesenberry said. He went on to add, “The more complete a story marketers tell in their commercials, the higher it performs in the rating polls, the more people like it, want to view it and share it.”

Stories are terrific tools for communication. They instruct, provide rest, give us inspiration and help us learn empathy for others. On the other hand, stories can do an enormous amount of damage. A story is a tool and in the wrong hands it can devastate entire cultures. Find me an evil dictator who has risen to power and I’ll show you a leader who, if nothing else, is an exceptional storyteller.

Robert McKee, one of the world’s foremost thinkers on story believes story calibrates a moral compass in our brains. He says it’s from story we learn what to value in life, what’s beautiful and what’s banal, what to live for and what to die for.

Story is no longer a tool only for artists. The rest of the world is beginning to understand that entire cultures are being shaped by the story tellers, and business leaders, pastors and parents are starting to wonder how they can incorporate more stories into their communication methodology. And they will all be benefited for doing so.

Thankfully, telling stories is a skill we can learn. There’s some structure to the art, some form, but once the form is learned, a practiced storyteller can captivate an audience of thousands as though they were a few friends sitting around a campfire.

I put together this eBook to introduce those who want to tell better stories to the most basic of storytelling structures. Simple as this structure is, though, it's powerful. Once you master the simple plot I outline, you'll never watch a movie, read a book, watch a television commercial or listen to a State of the Union address the same again. You'll begin to pick up the patterns, and as you do, you'll incorporate them into your own communication.

My hope, then, is you better connect with the world around you, and the good things you're trying to bring into the world will flourish in the fertile soil of a story well told.

Here's to telling better stories.

Sincerely,

Donald Miller

PART ONE

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A good story doesn't happen by accident

The best definition I've heard for story is that it is a *sense-making* device. One of the reasons people are drawn to stories is because within a story, life seems to be clear. When we hear a story we know exactly who a character is, what they want and what they're up against. We also know what great thing will happen if the hero succeeds and what tragedy will befall them if they fail. Real life doesn't quite work that way. Most people wake up every morning not quite sure what needs to be tackled first, what really matters in life, or what the stakes will be if they succeed or fail. Stories, then, present a clear and condensed version of life and for that reason people are drawn to them.

It's true, the human brain is drawn towards clarity and away from clutter.

A good story should be clear. The more a story rambles and wanders, the more it feels like real life and the less people will engage. When I say a story should be clear, I mean it should follow a series of events that make the most sense to a story's listener. So how do we tell a clear story? The first paradigm shift in understanding how to tell a clear story is this:

***Stories have pre-decided plots as opposed
to a random series of events.***

It's true, stories have structure and there are many types. There are three-acts, five-acts, anti-structure stories and so on. In fact, when a Hollywood screenwriter sits down to write a screenplay, he often plugs specific events into specific modules within a piece of software that insures he isn't getting too cluttered in his storytelling. On page three, for instance, he knows his protagonist has to do something kind to win over the audience and on page seven the protagonist has to get into trouble. And on and on it goes.

In fact, after studying stories for more than a decade now, I've realized the films *Tommy Boy*, *Star Wars Rebel Assault*, *The Hunger Games* and even *Moneyball* are basically, at their bones, the same plot. Simply plug in different characters and different dilemmas while keeping the same form and you've got a winning structure for a story.

You can think of story plots the way you might think of musical scales. For instance, if I played a recording of a dump-truck backing up, a child crying and perhaps some wind chimes being blown in a breeze, you wouldn't consider that music. You might even call it noise. So then what is the difference between music and noise? They are both, after all, vibrations in the air that stimulate your ear drums.

The difference between music and noise, though, is form. Noise becomes music when it submits itself to certain rules. Harmonics and melodies and so forth are simply noise tamed.

Does this mean all music is formulaic? Not at all. Within the structure of music scales and harmonics there is infinite creative space. But break the rules and music turns to noise quickly.

Story is no different. **A story is the organization of events so as to be told through a set form.** A series of random events becomes a story when it's organized and told through a structured plot. And not unlike music, within the rules of story, there is an infinite pool of creative opportunity.

The point is this: Good stories don't happen by accident. They are formed and molded and edited so they are clean and clutter free. And it's not always the "best" stories that get the most attention – it's more often the ones that are the most clearly told. Remember, the human brain is drawn to clarity more than action or comedy.

In the next section, I'll introduce you to a fixed plot in which you can insert any number of characters, conflicts and endings to create an infinite number of stories. You can even use the plot to organize the events of your day so that as you retell your day, your audience will be more compelled.

PART TWO



The structure I use to tell stories

For purposes of brevity, in this eBook I'll tell you about a plot structure I've developed to help me tell stories. It's a simple, seven-step process I've used in all of my books, in a nationally-released movie I co-wrote, in song lyrics I wrote for a top-selling country band and even in the marketing strategies for multi-billion dollar brands.

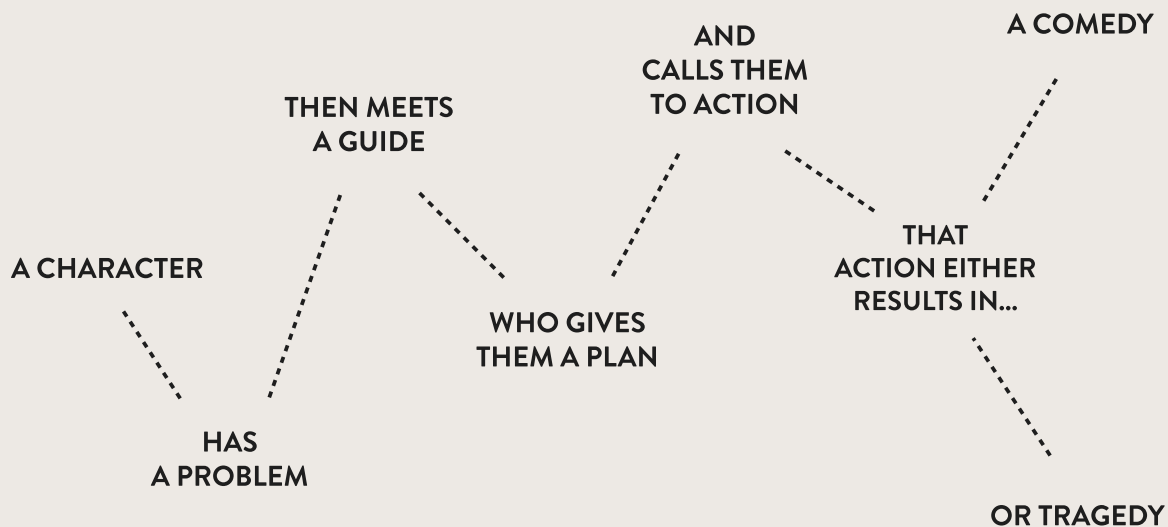
The structure is so simple it's become second nature for me. When I come home from work, I often recall my day through the plot structure I created. I don't even know I'm doing it, but because I do, my wife better understands what happened that day and even better, she doesn't find me boring. At least not most of the time.

Here's the simple structure I use:

***A character has a problem, then meets a guide
who gives them a plan and calls them to action.
That action either results in a comedy or tragedy.***

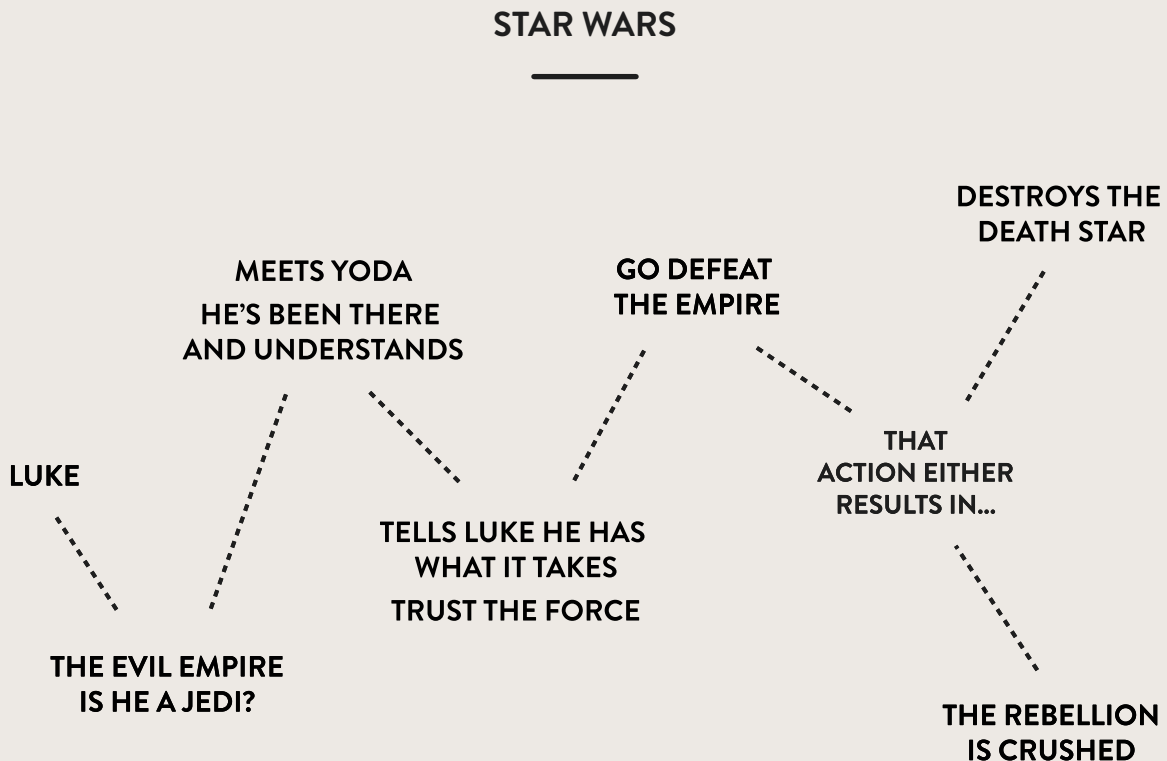
That's really it. In those two sentences rest the plot lines for thousands of Hollywood movies that have raked in billions of dollars.

Here's the plot I just spoke of on a grid:



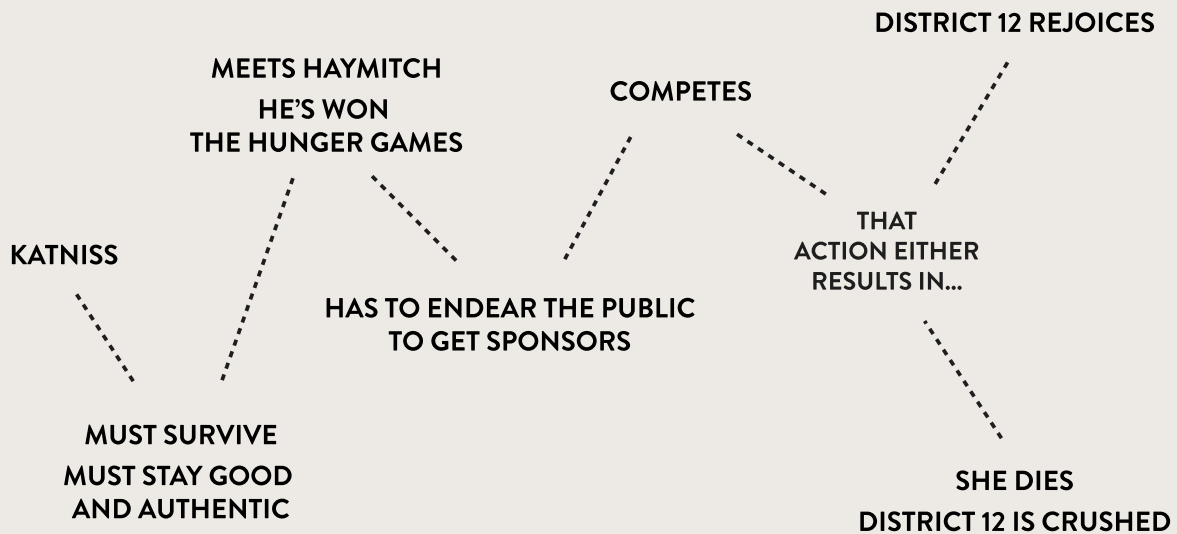
If you think about it, that's the same plot structure for all the movies I mentioned earlier. From *Star Wars* to *Tommy Boy* to *The Hunger Games*, that's it.

In fact, here are the grids for the movies *Star Wars* and *The Hunger Games*:



In the movie *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker wants to fight against the evil empire, but he also wants to know if he has what it takes to be a Jedi. He meets a guide named Yoda who gives him confidence, a plan and training to go out and defeat the enemy. The comic or happy ending happens when Luke destroys the Death Star and preserves the Rebellion to fight another day.

THE HUNGER GAMES



In the first *The Hunger Games* movie, Katniss is trying to survive the games and needs the help of Haymitch. Haymitch gives her confidence and a plan. She will need to endear the public to get sponsorships that will benefit her in the games. She takes action by participating in the games and, after a struggle, finds a happy ending in which she lives to fight another day and delivers hope to her family and District 12.

This is not the only structure you can use to tell stories, but it's the one that works best for me.

If you like, try this exercise with some problem you've dealt with in life. Simply write a brief statement for each of the elements and watch how your past can suddenly be understood better after you frame it as a story.

- 1. Who were you and what did you want?**
- 2. What was the problem you encountered and how did it make you feel?**
- 3. Who did you meet or what did you read that helped you?**
- 4. What plan did you come up with after meeting the guide?**
- 5. What did it feel like to take action on that plan?**
- 6. What could have been lost if you'd have failed?**
- 7. What was the happy ending you experienced?**

Here's an example of how simple this process works:

1. When I was in college, I really liked a girl who lived across the hall.
2. She didn't want anything to do with me, though. She hardly talked to me and the few times she did she kept messing up my name.
3. Her roommate was in my math class, though, and noticed I liked her. She thought we might even work out. She told me she was a huge soccer fan and said maybe I should take her to a Timbers game.
4. Too scared to ask her out, I bought a few soccer jerseys and wore them around campus. This caught her attention and we ended up talking for a half hour once in the hall. And she actually remembered my name.
5. Finally, I had to ask her out. The Sounders were coming to town so I bought tickets. The next time she stopped to talk to me, I mentioned the tickets the first time she brought up soccer. She said she really wanted to go, so I asked her out. She was from Seattle, so I told her if the Timbers won she had to buy me a drink after and if the Sounders won the drinks would be on me. She was completely in.
- 6&7. We ended up dating for most of that year and are still friends to this day. And the best part, she had to buy the drinks after the game.

And that's really it. It's a simple story, of course, nothing to win an award, but it's a story all the same. Remove the numbers, tell it over casual conversation and people will understand it, and we will end up connecting better with the people around us.

If the elements were more dramatic we'd really get their attention. The young man's date could get hit by a soccer ball at the game, or there might be more conflict when one of the players flirts with her later at the bar. If it's a fictional story, by all means ramp up the tension.

The point is that stories have structure and this is the one I use most of the time. And I use it because it works.

Feel free to create a little story structure of your own, or by all means use mine. If you get good, nobody will notice you're using a structure at all; all they'll notice is the story. And if you get really good, you won't even realize you're using the structure in the first place.

When using a story structure becomes second nature, the stories you tell will begin to sound like music in a world of noise.



You might be wondering why each of these elements are in my story structure and whether or not some of them are really necessary.

Let's look a little more closely at each of the elements so you can better understand why I think they're so important.

PART THREE

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Breaking down my story structure

Good storytellers do not break the rules of story. They may improvise within those rules, but they don't break through the guardrails. If they do, they risk creating noise and their audience gets turned off or worse, bored.

For this reason, let's look at each of the elements I use to tell stories in greater depth:



1. A CHARACTER

A person who will take the journey. The main character in a story is often called the hero or the protagonist. To really compel an audience, the hero is usually called to a task that is outside their comfort zone but necessary for their survival and the benefit of others. Interestingly, the hero is not the strongest or most reliable character in the story. That is usually the guide. But the hero is the center of the story because they are the one that must take action. They are also the only character in the book that must experience a character arc, that is a change in their person brought about by the adventure of the story.

Examples of heroes in stories: Frodo Baggins (*Lord of the Rings*), Rudy (*Rudy*), Luke Skywalker (*Star Wars*), Bridget Jones (*Bridget Jones's Diary*)



2. WHO HAS A PROBLEM

No story works unless the hero encounters a problem. The reason a character has to encounter a problem early in the story is because the problem posits a story question. Will the character get out of the problem? How bad will the damage be if they don't? Will they get their happy ending? Will they defeat their enemy? And this is why stories are so compelling to the human brain – they posit a series of questions that make the audience stick around to get an answer. Will the guy get the girl? Will the hero disarm the bomb? Will the team win the big game?

In a good story, there are often three levels of problems and they are intertwined. Those levels are *external*, *internal* and *philosophical*.

Examples of External Problems: Frodo (Must save Middle Earth), Rudy (Must make the Notre Dame Football Team), Luke Skywalker (Must defeat the Evil Empire), Bridget Jones (Must find love.)

Examples of Internal Problems: Frodo (Is he courageous, brave and disciplined enough? Is he good?) Rudy (Does he have what it takes? Is he worth as much as the others?) Luke Skywalker (Does he really have what it takes to be a Jedi or is his step-father right about him?) Bridget Jones (Is she worthy of love?)

Examples of Philosophical Problems: Frodo (Will good win out over evil? Will group interests win out over self interest?) Rudy (Can noble character compete with brute strength and force? Is life fair?) Luke Skywalker (Will good win out over evil? Will group interest win out over self interest? Will benevolence win out over greed? Will freedom win out over tyranny?) Bridget Jones (Is life fair? Can love win out over lust? Can self-love and self-acceptance be enough?)

As you use conflict in the stories you tell, you don't always need to cover the philosophical aspect of the problem; however, you will want to cover the internal aspect of the problem. Without an internal problem that the external problem manifests, you'll lose your audience.



3. MEETS A GUIDE WHO UNDERSTANDS THEIR FEAR

In stories, characters do not solve their own problems. If they could solve their own problems, they'd likely have never gotten into trouble in the first place. What normally happens, then, is the character meets somebody, reads something, remembers something or experiences something that helps them grow. That somebody or something is the guide. A good guide has “been there and done that” in the sense they understand the journey the character is on and can see clearly where they need to go. In fact, the first job of the guide is to listen, understand and empathize with the hero's problem. The second is to give the hero a plan they can use to fight for a happy ending. The guide, not the hero, is the strongest, most steady character in the story.

Examples of Guides: Frodo (Gandalf, many others), Rudy (Father, Janitor, Teachers, many others), Luke Skywalker (Yoda, Obi Wan Kenobi), Bridget Jones (Bridget's Mum, Friends, many more.)



4. AND GIVES THEM A PLAN

When the hero meets the guide they are confused. The job of the guide, then, is to break through the hero's confusion and give them confidence their life can be better. The plan can be as simple as a paradigm shift - *you used to think this way but I want you to think another way* - or as complex as a multi-level strategy that will help the hero win a complicated battle. Regardless, after the hero hears the plan they must decide whether to take action on the plan they've been given.

Examples of Plans: Frodo (You have what it takes), Rudy (Janitor meeting), Luke Skywalker (Trust the Force, Luke.) Bridget Jones (To find love we must take risks.)



5. THAT CALLS THEM TO ACTION

A call to action in a story is the point at which the hero must decide whether to act on the plan. Will they attack the Death Star or will they run? In a story, the call to action is a point of crisis. It's often a dark night of the soul for the hero. They must choose whether to stay in their comfort zone or embrace the plan given to them by the guide. A good guide empathizes with the hero's problem, gives them a plan and calls them to action.

Examples of Calls to Action: Frodo (Gandalf: "All I did was give your uncle a little nudge out the door.") Rudy (Tries out for the team, many, many more.) Luke Skywalker (Joins the Rebellion in the Fight to Destroy the DeathStar.) Bridget Jones (Makes the Call.)



6. THAT RESULTS IN A COMEDY

In story structure a happy ending is called a comedy while a sad ending is called a tragedy. Whether or not a story ends in comedy or tragedy, though, an audience must know what might happen if they are going remain interested. We have to know the hero can either get or lose the girl, disarm the bomb or die trying, or win the game or lose to their arch rival. Usually, at some point during the story, another character, often the guide, will state the happy ending well before it happens. “If you do this, middle earth will be saved” and so forth...

Examples of Comedy: Frodo (Saves Middle Earth, many more), Rudy (Plays in a game), Luke Skywalker (The rebellion lives on), Bridget Jones (Finds love for herself and finds love in a partner.)



7. OR A TRAGEDY

Careful screenwriters and novelists help us imagine dire consequences whether or not they actually happen because this builds suspense. Every audience must have a clear idea of what possible tragedy faces the hero if they don't act on the plan. If people don't know what tragedy might befall the hero, audiences zone out and lose interest.

Examples of Tragedy: Frodo (Middle Earth is taken over), Rudy (Never plays for Notre Dame), Luke Skywalker (The evil empire rules the galaxy), Bridget Jones (Remains lonely)

A STORY MUST BE CLEAR

There are a thousand possible formulas for telling a story, but once again, there is one rule that cannot be broken: A story must be clear.

If every scene in a story cannot be placed onto a simple chart, it runs the risk of boring the audience. There are exceptions, of course, but there aren't many. Being a good storyteller is a lot like being a good tennis player, first you learn form, then you improvise. If you don't learn form, you'll never compete with the professionals.

Just remember this: Clarity is king.

As you begin to practice telling stories, focus on clarity first. You may not always woo an audience with your robotic storytelling, but this is the only way to really learn. Once it becomes easy for you, you'll notice you don't always keep the same order or you sometimes leave out the guide. You may figure out you're exceptionally good at building up the internal conflict or that you're terrific at painting a picture of potential tragedy. That said, it's all within a simple form and it's only by learning our scales we can begin to write new and original music.

I don't think much about story structure anymore. Sooner or later it becomes routine. Unless I'm studying a manuscript or helping a company with their brand strategy, story structure remains in the back of my mind the way scales and harmonics remain in the back of a musician's mind. In fact, I often don't think about story structure until I realize something's wrong. If I'm watching a commercial and something doesn't seem clear, I pick up a journal I keep on my coffee table and plot out the structure of the commercial to see where it went wrong. Or if I'm bored in a movie, I go through a mental checklist of about twenty things that have to happen to see which one the screenwriters left out. Inevitably, though, if the story is boring or unclear, there's a critical element missing. Understanding the structure of story is that important.

PART FOUR



How to use stories to connect

A story is the most powerful tool you can use to connect with another human being. Whether we're recapping our day or telling our kids bed-time stories, our deepest selves reach out and connect through the recounting of events.

Here are some of the different ways I use story structure in my life and work:

WRITING A BOOK

If I'm writing a book, I use the same structure I presented in this eBook, only I repeat it over and over. Often, I'll repeat this plot structure several times within a chapter, almost like a wheel turning around, then I'll wrap up the chapter with either a happy or a tragic ending. And each of the chapters fits into a greater epic that, hopefully, is the story or theme of the book. And so my books are simply little stories within a larger story. Each chapter could be considered a subplot, if you will.

For instance, if I'm writing the book about the creative process, I may use the epic story of having to wrap up a screenplay for an unruly producer. If I don't get it done, I don't get to collect the rest of the advance. So, within chapter one I use a subplot story of how I overcame procrastination, then in chapter two I tell a story about how I learned to develop a character and so on and so on. So there's the big story and then the smaller stories that feed into the big story. Make sense? Feel free to use the same plot structure, though, whether it's your epic story or your subplot.

In fact, as you outline your book, just come up with as many stories as you can using the same structure, then place them into different topical chapters. You'll be surprised at how quickly your list of stories starts looking like a full book.

IN A SPEECH

If I'm giving a speech to a room full of business leaders, I use the same story structure to capture their attention. First I introduce myself, then I talk about something I wanted for my business, perhaps a specific financial goal I wanted to attain, then I describe the problem I had trying to get it and then I talk about a person I met, a leader I trusted or even a book I read that helped me realize there might be a way out of my troubles. I then talk about how scared I was to take action because of how much could be lost. After painting a picture of potential tragedy, I let the audience know how I took action and how it all ended well.

For each point I want to make I tell a story using the same structure. And it's only at the end of each story I allow myself to make a one minute editorial comment. Most public speakers do the opposite. They spend hours making editorial comments and use the story to cap their speech. I assure you, the only thing the audience hears is the story.

As we tell our story, the audience begins to apply the story to their lives. You don't have to do the work for them.

While it may sound formulaic and manipulative, I make sure the stories I tell are actually true. If we are lying, we are being manipulative, and that's not what I'm recommending. What we're doing when we tell structured stories is serving our audience by not being a boring speaker. We're also helping them understand and apply complicated information so our audience can succeed.

INTRODUCING MYSELF

When somebody asks what I do for a living, I don't tell them I'm a writer who runs a brand-strategy company. If I told them that, they'd just sit there and wonder what kind of books I write and I'd get no brand-strategy business. If we've got time, and the conversation permits, I tell them a story. It goes like this:

Years ago I was a writer and I had a small conference company. We were doing fine, but I realized nobody was coming to my conferences unless they were fans. I really wanted to reach out of my fan base, but I didn't know how to do it. One day I got on an airplane and sat next to a person who was reading my latest book. I joked with the guy that I'd heard the author was kind of a jerk. But the guy never figured out I was actually the author. I ended up spending a couple hours talking to the guy about my book and what I found was that even though he loved my books, he couldn't explain them. My book titles were elusive, my writing was poetic and they were hard to describe. I realized then that I hadn't given my readers language they could use to spread the word about my books. So I ended up renting a cabin in the mountains and I created a brand-strategy using plot structures hollywood has been making billions off of for years. By the time I was done, I'd created an entire process a business could go through to clarify their marketing. And after I took my little conference business through it, we quadrupled in size in only 18 months. The results were phenomenal. And not only this, but once I formalized the process, people started asking me to help them with their businesses. The first companies who expressed interest were Pantene, Ford/Lincoln and even The White House. So, I started a second company called StoryBrand and we help brands go through the process of clarifying their brand communication.

You know, I've told that story a thousand times and I've never had anybody fail to understand what we do. Not only that, but we've helped brands like Chick-Fil-A teach their entire staff how to structure and tell their personal stories as they relate

to their brand. Imagine a company in which staff members could tell a clear story about who they are and why their work matters. An entire staff is converted to a passive sales force the second they learn to tell their personal stories as it relates to the company they work for.

UNDERSTANDING OUR LIVES

You know by now telling a story is all about organizing a series of events so they make sense. What I've found, along with connecting with others, is story is an incredible tool I can use to understand my life. My day job is to help companies develop their brand strategies, but every four or five years I have the luxury of being able to write a book. Most people know me as a writer and don't even realize I work in marketing, but the truth is I don't get to write as often as I'd like. When I do get to write a book, though, I always start with the same question:

What in the world happened to me since the last time I wrote a book?

Because I write memoirs, and because my life isn't as exciting as, say, a Russian spy, my books are mostly about inward journeys, little ways I've developed as a human. What happens when I write one of these books is I better understand my life. Until I sit down and organize the events that took place over the last few years, I hardly realize anything happened at all. But after thinking through the seven elements of the story structure I've been talking about, it becomes obvious I'm not at all the person I was only a few years before.

We are all on a journey, of course. We all want things for ourselves and our families and those desires launch us into stories. And stories are filled with risk and fear and joy and pain. In each of our stories, friends and guides have passed through and those friends have taught us things. But how will we know what we've learned and allow those lessons to change us unless we translate the events back to ourselves?

The point of any story is always character transformation. I am so grateful to have studied story if for no other reason than it's helped me realize how much I've changed over the years as a human being. Story has given beauty and meaning to my life because it's no longer passing by without me reflecting on it and noting its positive and negative turns and what those turns have done to me to make me a better person.

I believe it's true every person should write their memoir if for no other reason than it helps them understand who they are, what's happened to them and who it is their lives have caused them to become. A person who understands themselves is easier to connect with, more settled and, most importantly, can see how their story interconnects with the stories of others.

CONCLUSION

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Story, in some ways, is still as mysterious to me as music. I can't pretend to understand it fully, but I feel its effect and I'm grateful.

I'll conclude with this quote from Robert McKee. It's from his exceptional book called *Story*. It's my hope for you.

“Write every day, line by line, page by page, hour by hour. Do this despite fear. For above all else, beyond imagination and skill, what the world asks of you is courage, courage to risk rejection, ridicule and failure. As you follow the quest for stories told with meaning and beauty, study thoughtfully but write boldly. Then, like the hero of the fable, your dance will dazzle the world.”



APPLY STORY TO YOUR LIFE AND BUSINESS

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CREATE YOUR BRANDSCRIPT

STORYBRAND

WE HELP YOUR BRAND TELL A CLEAR STORY

Donald Miller has created a 2-day workshop in which business leaders come together to create a BrandScript for their brands. The result is clarity, unity of mission and a marketing strategy that will increase your revenue.

Sign up for a workshop at storybrand.com