

Public Speaking and Strategic Narratives for Leaders

The Essential Elements of Storytelling

By Paul Jenkins, 30 July 2021

The elements of storytelling – sometimes referred to as narrative elements – are the essential moving parts of every story, regardless of which form it takes. Understanding these elements helps you tell better stories, whether in creative work or in business communication. I think it's useful to look at the following elements of story.

Character

It's an old question among writers whether character or plot comes first – and which between them is the more critical. But they are inseparable. It is through the actions of the characters that the plot unfolds. The plot happens because the characters want something or are in conflict with their situation.

I think the best stories always end up being about the people rather than the event, which is to say character driven.

Stephen King, On Writing

I'm going to come down on the side of Character being the most important element of great storytelling, without which no story can excel. The reason is that it's in the nature of the human experience that we get very good at observing ourselves and others; we are relatively poor at retaining and engaging with a bunch of 'factoids.'

Unless we have characters with whom we can relate, it is hard, if not impossible, to immerse ourselves in a story. So the characters have clear personalities; they have to be believable people to whom we can relate..

Although there are many different types of characters, the principal ones – present in every story – are the protagonist and antagonist. Without these, no story can have **Conflict** and tension, which are essential to move a story forward and have a satisfying conclusion.

Setting

Good storytelling has a specific setting. The setting is the story's time and place; it is sometimes referred to as 'décor': the material backdrop against which the action occurs.

As the storyteller, you must put in enough detail to conjure the setting up in the reader's imagination, but not so much that you stop the story or slow it down.

Setting can elevate a story by invoking a unique atmosphere. For example, it can reinforce the mood or help characterize the people or actions in the story.

Plot

In a story, the plot is the events that happen within the overall story. Thus, the plot is what happens. An event can be a series of physical actions – such as the characters arguing. Or internal actions such as a character's decision to take the sword or the money.

Plots go from a setup and inciting incident – which jolts the hero into action – into rising action. Then, a series of ‘complications’ raises the tension and conflict (and sometimes the tempo also) until a climax and resolution. These are often arranged as follows:

- Introduction (exposition and story setup).
- Rising Action (the conflict builds).
- Climax (the turning point where the situation is at its most intense).
- Falling Action.
- Denouement (the unraveling of the conflict to show how things have changed).

Theme

The theme is what your story is about, and as the author of a story, you should be able to express its theme clearly.

Theme can be, for example, about resilience – and how your characters (and you as the storyteller) have the will to overcome adversity. Or about consequences – such as the power of words to deceive, as in ‘The Boy Who Cried Wolf.’ The futility of revenge – like Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet’ – or the consequences of inaction as in the novel ‘Sophie’s Choice’ by William Styron.

What’s important is that the theme should be consistent with your other storytelling elements. For example, look at how ‘The Godfather’ applies the character-driven theme of loyalty within a story about organized crime.

The theme is often hinted at or not openly expressed. You leave it to the reader/viewer to discern the message – connecting the story’s dots to understand the theme directly or subconsciously.

In complex stories, themes that start out as subtextual may become overt. This is not to say that you must tell your audience what the story is about explicitly. In fact, the most powerful stories often leave the audience to draw their own conclusions about the theme.

Universal and timeless themes can be potent in a story. Love endures all, for example.

Other Things to Keep in Mind as You Develop Your Story

Conflict

Conflict is fundamental for stories to work. It’s the storytelling element without which all else fails. Of course, we don’t mean literal battle (although it might be this), but rather anything that opposes the protagonist’s goal, and it needs to be significant.

Conflict can be emotional or physical, internal, or external... so long as it provides tension that makes the story interesting. And Conflict can start as soon as the protagonist comes up with a goal. The character doesn’t even have to know what the conflict is yet (though they often do).

In a sense, conflict can be thought of as the reason for the story. Everything else in the story (plot, dialogue, descriptions, etc.) serves to set up, create, or resolve conflict on the way to the story’s resolution.

The protagonist must have a conflict, whether with their environment, other characters, or themselves. The best conflicts have emotional and moral dimensions, too, as well as emotional and physical stakes.

Conflict doesn't have to be purely external, with characters at each other's throats. Internal conflict, where characters in a story are opposed by themselves or a false belief, can be compelling.

Conflict is what builds suspense and tension.

Stakes

The story needs investment for the protagonist, which goes beyond their own personal needs and expresses the universal human condition.

This is usually reflected in the form of what the protagonist might lose. The stakes must be something significant – the stakes need to be high enough for us to care. For example, if the hero does not complete a mission, someone close to them will be killed.

Setting up a story with sufficiently high stakes, you set in motion a ticking time bomb that needs to be solved!

The problem with stakes is that they can be positive (winning the love of a beautiful princess) and negative (being turned into a frog). But in practical terms, the negative side of the equation must be the strongest, or you'll have no conflict.

Verisimilitude – Truth

In a good story, told well, 'Truth' in storytelling is something that is felt because a story seems real, captivating. We believe in the story and in the characters. This has nothing to do with 'scientific' or 'objective' truth.

Truth includes what seems inevitable – it's based on what readers might expect to happen in the story (in terms of the Plot). Or it's based on the 'truths' that the readers believe about the world.

In stories, truth is often about a reality that tells us more about the nature of humanity. Even fantasy or science fiction stories can feel true if they are populated by believable characters who act in recognizably human ways. The principle of verisimilitude says that the reader/viewer should be able to believe the story because of its emotional and intellectual integrity.

What the reader/viewer should be able to sense is a sense of emotional truth that draws them into the story. A knowledge of the kind of people that might be part of the story (and how they would behave) engenders a form of empathy.

Stories work best when they reflect the universal human experience when they uncover something unfamiliar in what we thought was familiar. Feeding our natural sense of curiosity into a thirst for discovery.

Stories should be more than just about the action and the adventure. It should be about the human condition. Even though this usually is never stated overtly, to do so would be dull and laborious.

A good storyteller does not tell you what to think or how to feel. Instead, a good storyteller tells you the story in a way that will allow you to see some truth about the world, about the human condition.