

Storytelling Guidelines

- A. Title.** Our experiences are complex. Stories tend to be simple. Thinking of a title will help you focus and get to the heart of your story. What is the title of the story you want to tell? Or, if you were to pitch this story to a movie producer, what's the one sentence pitch? For example: *"How I learned to forgive my mother."* Or *"Adventures in the Ashland Sewer System."*
- B. Setting.** Give a few introductory details, only what is necessary: place, time, age, others involved and your relationship to them. This gives your story a context, a setting and characters. This can happen in a sentence: *"I grew up angry in the vacant plains of Eastern Kansas, the eldest son of Mennonite farmers."*
- C. Character.** We need to have a feeling for the "who" of the story. A few descriptive words (short, rough hands, a chipped front tooth). Personality (quiet, never made eye contact, loved dogs). Avoid superlatives ("the most amazing!"). What was the longing or deep fear that you carried (helps us get to the heart of the person)—*"I longed to move away from home."* *"I was terrified of becoming my father."* In an honest way (without emotional pandering), give us something vulnerable about the main character....vulnerability is the door that allows the audience to connect—*"I lost my mother when I was 5, and I think I wanted every female teacher I had to be my mother."*
- D. Action.** In a story something happens. Stories have a beginning, middle, and an end. There's a conflict, a climax, and a resolution. No lectures, no explaining, no group therapy. Try to focus on one interaction, one moment that changed you. Get into the action as soon as possible.
- E. See it.** Like good writing show, don't tell. In other words, visualize the scenes of your story and then describe these scenes without lots of background and explanations: *"She was short, stout, with a face like a withered apple. She was also the best lover I ever had."* Don't give us your thoughts on the justice system, give us the smell, the colors, the sounds of the jail you sat in. Like a movie director, create an internal storyboard: Scene 1. *My grandfather gives me a BB gun.* Scene 2. *Sitting in the Medford police station.* Scene 3. *My mother enrolling me in Catholic school.* Turn on your mental movie projector, conjure up the detailed images, then tell us what you saw, heard, and felt.
- F. Start and Finish.** Memorize your opening line, otherwise you'll wander: *"When I was a girl my only friends were hamsters."* You also need to know your last line to keep your story from trailing off....: *"Twenty years later I'm still waiting for that apology."* Make sure the last line helps us know what the story means to you: *"I still don't know what happens after we die, but every time I hear that song I see her face, and I hear her singing, and it makes me smile."*
- G. Summary:** Remember there is no right way to tell your story. Everyone has a different style. Talk in a way that's natural to who you are. Begin it, follow it through the action, end it and tell what it all means. Remember color, beauty, feelings, and touch. Turn on the lights, camera, action. Place the characters and action in mid-air between yourself and your listeners. Don't talk about it, tell it. Live through it again.

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