

Defining Story

Practitioners who don't feel it's important to define "story"	Practitioners to whom it's important to define "story" and offer definitions
<p>Terrence Gargiulo: I'm more comfortable letting go of story labels and definitions and getting down to just working and living with them. Isn't that all we really can do? Definitions fly in the face of the very power of consciousness and awareness that stories offer us. When I work with groups I beg forgiveness for not giving a definition of stories; usually to the frustration of more literal and left-brain dominant types. Then through my interaction with the group I model story-based communication behaviors. I will collage strings of stories, elicit people's stories, connect stories with one another, use lots of analogies and references to other stories to trigger rich associations in the minds and conversations of people present. All of this is meant to encourage proactive reflection. I want people to remember their experiences and appreciate/ respect/take an interest in the experiences of others, look for connections between their experiences, and imagine new possibilities. This is the fluid and emergent quality of stories. And this is the framework I follow in all of my consulting work whether I am designing a large-scale change management, developing a communications strategy, or architecting a learning event.</p> <p>I have a passion for inciting insights in others. I am a conduit for opening story spaces. These are polyphonic dialogues orchestrated with reflective opportunities for insights to emerge. Recollecting our experiences and the experiences of others are precious gifts of attention that never stop gracing us with sense-giving and sense-making moments. I am committed to living these questions ... Can we be authentic? Can we remember who we are? Can we create connections within ourselves, and between ourselves and others? Can we soar with our imaginations beyond the boundaries we erect in the name of stability? Can we let go of our habits and still feel alive?</p> <p>Stephanie West Allen: I don't really have a definition. It is the flesh on the skeleton of the conflict. The meat; the heart; the blood, sweat, and tears. How did each of us get here? Where do we want to go now? The paths we have taken and the roads we want to follow.</p> <p>Madelyn Blair: I find it a bit wasteful to spend either time or energy on the definition of story. I know that there are those who feel this is important, but for my work in organizations, I find that people can work effectively using story without burdening them with definitions.</p>	<p>Loren Niemi: My fundamental definition of story is that it is the conscious expression of experience and imagination in a narrative form. The word "conscious" is critical and speaks to the idea that a story is chosen and shaped. This definition is intentionally very broad, with narrative forms including a wide variety of expressions – oral, written, visual, ritual, political, etc. On one end of the spectrum, it includes the common daily act of recounting our experience over the dinner table or around the water cooler and on the other end, it includes the whole of culture, historical, political, religious narratives, the myths we live by, etc. I believe that story is fundamental to our being human – the organizing principle that allows us to order the world and transfer knowledge from one individual, culture and generation to another. On a practical level, all the work I do is storytelling and the core of that work is to make the stories we tell conscious, chosen, artful, meaningful.</p> <p>Carol Mon: When I first got involved with storytelling I wrote "Storytelling in its simplest form is merely a relaying of events; in its art form, it is a mystical journey the teller and listener take together." Both parts of storytelling have a place in our world. I still like the statement for how I believe it covers the different types of tales and would like to build on it by saying that I do not espouse one definition of story; one size does not fit all. Professional storytellers do not put much stock in anecdotes as stories and yet in the business world, anecdotes are powerful, easy ways to communicate. There are a few commonalities among all forms of story and those probably are what should be used to define story. Whether it is a one-liner, epic, ballad, poem, movie, anecdote, or fairy tale, all good stories evoke some kind of emotion and cause a connection between the teller and listener. Let's not complicate it with pedantic definitions of opening, conflicts, resolutions, and character development. Many non-professional storytellers feel they should not use stories in their communications because their "stories" do not follow a strict form. A looser definition encourages more people to consciously use stories to strengthen their messages.</p>

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<p>Sharon Lippincott: Beyond reminding people that stories have a beginning, middle and end, and that they will be easier for strangers to understand if they answer the "Five W questions: who, what, why, when and where," I don't espouse any particular definition of story or story form. I encourage people to write in any way that feels natural and spontaneous to them. There is no wrong way to write, and prescribing forms and styles will stifle more people than it will help. Some few will aspire to more polish. That's great too. There are many fine books, my own included [Editor's note: Sharon's book is <i>The Heart and Craft of Lifestory Writing.</i>], to help those who want guidance.</p> <p>I often use the example of one of my grandmothers who wrote her autobiography when she was about 70. It is short, and consists of disjointed paragraphs that often raise more questions than they answer. She commits nearly every blunder a lifestory writer could imagine. She comes across as a nut case. But ... she took the time to do this, and I treasure every word.</p> <p>My mother began writing her lifestory, but was unable to finish before the end of her life. She didn't tell anyone about this, and we only found her drafts after her death. What a treasure! I compiled what she had written, editing only to fix typos and correct documented factual errors. The story of her girlhood will live on for generations.</p> <p>Thus my constant admonition, "Any lifestory you write, no matter how crude and unfinished, is better than writing nothing."</p> <p>To date, my personal preference has been for writing short vignettes about specific memories. I now have more than 500 of these vignettes and am feeling the urge to begin compiling selected ones into more coherent memoir format.</p> <p>Susan Luke: In my opinion, there can never be just one definition of story. For every individual there are a myriad of stories they can share — each will be as different and unique as the person sharing them.</p> <p>One of the beauties of story is this difference and the experience behind the stories that makes them live and breathe and have universal appeal. In my experience, the greatest challenge to those of us who tell stories is to give our listeners enough time to not only enjoy and/or learn from the story, but to savor it, to connect it to their own experience.</p> <p>If there are strict definitions and/or restrictions, the creative process is stifled and the opportunities to share stories in new and different ways/media will not happen.</p>	<p>Corey Blake: I am a firm believer in two things: (1) the three-act structure and (2) characters drive stories. I follow the standard "inciting incident, plot point one, mid-point, plot point two" structure, but within that I have found tremendous freedom. I prepare extensive character bibles before writing any fiction (25-50 pages per main character), and I believe that all the work is done before the actual manuscript writing begins. If the homework is done well, the writing is pure joy. And I've experienced that enough to know that it works! In my early years as a writer, I also experienced what a lack of preparation causes; that pain inspired me to create my writing method!</p> <p>Thaler Pekar: I find the most useful framework for beginning story sharers is that a story has a beginning, middle, and end. I work with incredibly smart leaders who, when I initially met them, were often reluctant to share stories in professional settings. Precisely because they recognize the power of great storytelling, they were hesitant to share their stories — they didn't think they possessed a perfectly polished, fleshed out, protagonist/compelling conflict/earth-shattering journey/surprising resolution tale to share. The quest for the perfect can be the enemy of the good!</p> <p>I energize leaders (and, in turn, their audiences), by helping them surface their passion and become the most authentic and persuasive speakers possible. Through several short exercises, I help these bright people see that they are telling stories all day long, and that they possess a lifetime of interesting anecdotes and a multitude of fascinating, powerful stories. To this end, the only story framework I encourage beginning story sharers to use is "beginning, middle, and end."</p> <p>Then, details that reveal emotion, and trigger the senses, are added. And then conflict, resolution, and transformation.</p> <p>I've always known that conflict is a critical element in story. But I recently had an epiphany about how even the slightest frame of conflict enables a fact to stick in a listener's mind. At an event in the "Brainwave: It Could Change Your Mind" series at the Rubin Museum of Art, George Bonanno, Columbia University psychology professor and expert in emotion, stated the fact that birds share more computational language skills with humans than our closest primates.</p> <p>This fact alone was new and interesting to me. But Bonanno added that former President George Bush, who was "unfriendly to science," cut funding for a perhaps silly sounding, but quite scientifically important, study of Pigeon Language Cognition Skills.</p> <p>Adding this point of conflict turned that fact into a story. Bonanno provided a great example of how to take a fact, add a conflict, and make the fact memorable.</p>

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	<p>Sean Buvala: I think that definition of storytelling is critical for it is within the lines of definition we get the most freedoms. I have worked for some time with the following definition. "Storytelling is the intentional sharing of a narrative in words and actions for the benefit of both the listener and the teller."</p> <p>Just quickly, "intentional" means that not everything we do is storytelling. Storytelling is a planned activity and process. "Narrative" means what is being talked about has a beginning, middle, and end. "Sharing" means that there is an audience in front of the teller, which can be one person or thousands. "Benefit" means both the listener and the teller leave the sharing of story as a changed person. Even after telling some stories for decades, I still hear new ideas from even my oldest stories. Usually, what comes as new to me is when the listener tells me what they hear. I am not a fan of giving the morals to stories. I would rather the audience work that out with me instead of being told what to think.</p> <p>That is a rather quick take on my definition of storytelling. We usually go rather in depth in our workshops on this definition so the audience can add to or take away as they need.</p> <p>Annie Hart: I am dedicated to spreading a new definition of storytelling that includes its deeper powers. My personal mission is to create a context in which story can be known and experienced as the force of change that it is. Stories change us individually, collectively and globally. Storytelling is no longer just a medium of entertainment but a context in which to live our lives and a tool for personal and global change. I want everyone to realize that our lives are built on story and that we can use stories to create a better world.</p>