National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

How to…
…use narrative and storytelling

How to use narrative and storytelling to engage with the public

This is not a guide to teach you how to become an author, but instead focuses on using narrative technique to communicate your message. By thinking about what you want to say in terms of a story, you can create a coherent thread that is easy and interesting to follow. In creating a narrative to run through your entire talk, article or exhibition, you can ensure that your engagement activity follows a coherent structure. Within this, it is also a good idea to make use of storytelling and anecdotes in order to illustrate certain points. Don't forget – narrative is not only reserved for talks and the written word. Exhibitions or graphic-based displays should also reflect a narrative, or story arc, which the audience can follow.

WHY USE NARRATIVE AND STORYTELLING?

1. Take pity on your audience! Your research may seem like second nature to you but for people who don't have your knowledge and are not familiar with the language you use on a daily basis, it can be very difficult to follow in one sitting. Storytelling is a good way to capture the audience's imagination in a way that they can understand and relate to.

2. With a narrative, the audience does not have to remember a series of dates, facts or principles. They need only stick with the premise of the story. The human brain can only handle so much information. Every day, people use memory tools, such as narrative, to recall sequences of letters, words or numbers. For example, in music many people use the mnemonic 'Every Good Boy Deserves Favours' in order to remember the stave sequence 'EGBDF' (and similarly FACE for the spaces).

3. Constructing a narrative will also help you in structuring your speech and sticking to the point or points you want to make

4. Storytelling and narrative provides the opportunity to insert an element of fun into the activity, which will make the experience more engaging for both you and the audience

5. Storytelling – particularly in the creation of characters and exemplars, allow you to easily reference something you have previously explained, without having to repeat the entire explanation

HOW TO TELL A STORY

Decide on the purpose of your engagement, what you want to achieve and what it is important for the audience to know. Then frame your narrative around this. Choose your anecdotes wisely. Don't use storytelling to explain the simple stuff, use it to simplify the complicated bits.

When constructing a narrative or telling an anecdote, keep your story simple so that it flows neatly.

STRUCTURE

- Give the story a beginning, a middle and an end

- Introduce the characters and set the stage at the beginning
- Introduce conflict – without conflict you have no story. Conflict can take many forms (i.e. human vs human; human vs society; human vs nature; human vs himself/herself)
- Create a turning point which leads to a resolution.
- Conclude – make sure that all conflict is resolved and that all the loose ends are tied up.hy use narrative and storytelling?

There are a number of schools of thought, and tools you can refer to, in order to structure your story and enhance its impact

Aristotle's three-act structure for storytelling:

BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END

- **Beginning:** Set up the story - introduce the characters and the status quo and then introduce the catalyst.
- **Middle:** The conflict rises until it reaches a crisis or turning point.
- **End:** The climax and resolution.

Pad the story out: Gustav Freytag's five plot components:

EXPOSITION	RISING ACTION	CLIMAX	FALLING ACTION	RESOLUTION

- **Exposition:** The situation before action starts.
- **Rising action:** A series of conflicts and a crisis.
- **Climax:** The turning point/most intense moment of the story.
- **Falling action:** Action that follows the climax.
- **Resolution:** The conclusion, tying together all threads.

Ken Adams' Story Spine. This consists of a series of opening sentences which help to structure a narrative:

- **"Once upon a time"** – Set the stage, introduce the context and introduce the characters.
- **"Everyday"** – Establish the norm, so people can achieve a sense of change from what has gone before.
- **"But one day"** – The catalyst. The reason for telling the story.
- **"Because of that"** – The heart of the story. The consequences that ensue from the catalyst.
- **"Until finally"** – The climax.
- **"And ever since then"** – The resolution and conclusion.

CHARACTERS

- Create characters for your story and give them a name. People relate to people so give it a human face.

- There should be learning for principle characters that the audience can empathise with, including an opportunity for audience members to learn something about themselves. In his body of work 'Poetics', Aristotle suggested that the audience should relate emotionally to the conflict laid out in the plot and any change in the characters as a result. He said that the imitation of events that arouse emotions, such as pity or fear, help the spectator to achieve an emotional release (catharsis).
- Though characters are important, keep your eyes on the plot - the characters exist to drive the plot.

ENHANCING IMPACT

- Anything that does not further the plot and does not weaken the story by its absence is unnecessary and should be removed.
- You might want to use props, images or toys to add colour to your story. This can also be useful in addressing sensitive issues as it deflects attention from you, the storyteller.
- Practice telling your stories to a non-expert. Does it make sense? Does it achieve what you hoped?

TOP TIPS

FROM SCIENCE WRITER, EDITOR AND AUTHOR JON TURNEY

- The story of your research (getting the grant, making an experiment work, doing the survey, making sense of the data, getting a new insight into your problem) might fascinate other people. But mostly they will relate to your work differently. You will need to discover the story of your research all over again.

- In terms of tone, imagine how you would tell your story to someone in the pub.

- Some of the best stories are those that appeal to the sense of wonder. Do you have any research which finds out (or might find out) things that make us go "wow"?

- If wonder is not on offer, does your research have 'stuff that someone can use'? e.g. if it is medical, the potential link with disease is probably a given. But, this can be tricky because the use, or potential use, may not be what you are thinking about from day to day.

- Be careful not to over-claim the value and use of your research.

- Is there a real world problem or phenomenon your research relates to? It may, of course, be involved with revealing the problem itself, or its true extent or nature. That is often the case with empirical social science. It may offer clues about how to respond to it.

- Getting the picture clear in your own mind will help in pinning down the exact connection between your work and the real-world issue you want people to consider. An old journalist's checklist for scoping a subject can help. It goes like this:

    1. History – does the problem have a past?

    2. Scope – how widespread is it, how various how intense?

3. Reasons – why is it happening now?

4. Impacts – Who or what is affected and how?

5. Countermoves – What could be done about it?

6. Futures – What could it lead too if countermoves don't happen?

- Follow the old rule: never overestimate the reader's knowledge, but never underestimate their intelligence

- Remember, some of the understanding you take for granted will baffle a newcomer.

External links

- **Narrative structure, plot devices and stereotypes,** from Pennsylvania State University
- **Character and narrative structure** from Eric Pattersone of the University of North Carolina Wilmington.
- **Storytelling – benefits and tips** from the British Council's Teaching English resource.
- TED talks by Andrew Stanton on **"The clues to a great story"** and Nancy Duarte on **"Uncovering the Structure of the Greatest Communicators"**