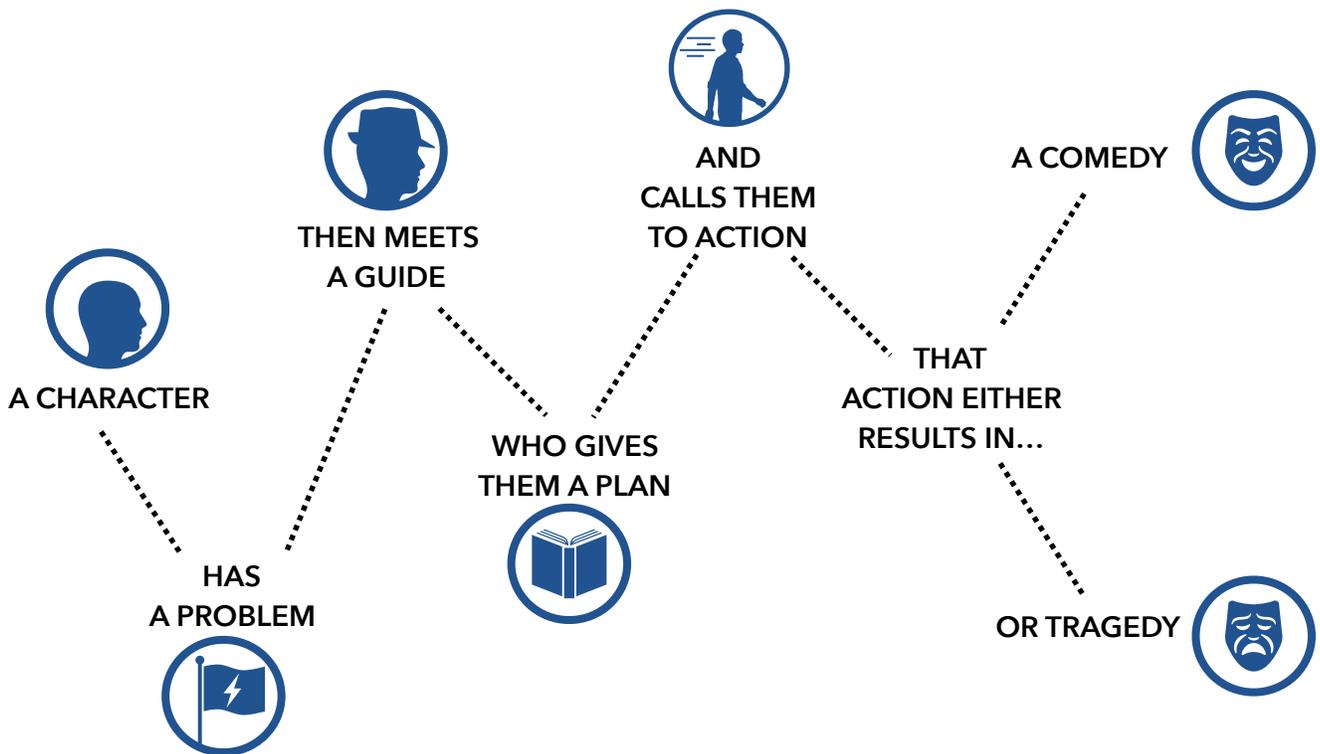




THE STRUCTURE OF STORY

A character has a problem but then meets a guide who gives them a plan and calls them to action resulting in either a comedy or tragedy.



In that structure rest the plot lines for thousands of Hollywood movies that have raked in billions of dollars. Good storytellers do not break the rules of story. They may improvise within those rules, but they don't break through the guardrails.

The Character:

The Problem:

The Tragedy Avoided:

STORY TITLE

The Guide:

The Plan:

The Action:

The Happy Conclusion:

TELLING YOUR OWN STORIES

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?



1. A CHARACTER

A person who will take the journey (often called the hero or the protagonist).

A few rules to follow with your main character: Must be relatable. The hero is usually called to a task that is outside of their comfort zone but necessary for their survival and the benefit of others.

The main character is like a surrogate for you, the audience member. They're learning and discovering information at the same time you are, so that by the time the film ends, you feel like you've gone on the same emotional journey the character has.

Interestingly, the hero is not the strongest or most reliable character in the story. That is usually the guide or guru. But the hero is the center of the story because they are the one that must take action. They are also the only character that must experience a character arc, that is a change in their person brought about by the adventure.

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

Every story begins with a character **who wants something, preferably one thing.**

Most people and companies aren't clear in explaining who they are or what they offer. When you define something your audience wants, you invite them into a very specific story. That's what they're looking for; they're looking for you to invite them into a story.

Pose a scenario or a problem and then solve it. If you throw out multiple solutions to multiple problems, you'll be ignored. The human brain just isn't made to process that many storylines.

Ask: What does my audience want as it relates to my brand? Is my story going to clearly communicate the one solution or happy ending it offers?



2. WHO HAS A PROBLEM

No story works unless the hero encounters a problem early in the story. The problem leads the audience to posit a story question. Will the character get out of the problem? How bad will things be if they don't? Is there a happy ending and will they get it? Will "good" triumph?

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: 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 benevolence win out over greed? Will freedom win out over tyranny?) Bridget Jones (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.

Ask: Have you clearly defined the problem your story solves?



3. MEETS A GUIDE WHO UNDERSTANDS THEIR FEARS

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 understands the journey the character is on and can see clearly where they need to go. The guide empathizes with the hero's problem and provides a plan the hero can use to fight for a happy ending. The guide is the strongest, most steady character in the story.

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

This is a big paradigm shift.

People aren't looking for a hero. They're looking for a guide.

If you understand this important principle, you'll change how you talk about yourself.

The first step in positioning yourself as a guide is understanding your role in your customer's story:

- You're not Luke Skywalker. You're Yoda.
- You're not Katniss. You're Haymitch.
- You're not James Bond. You're Q.

So, when people come to you, don't talk about what *you're* trying to do. Lay out your solutions as weapons that will help them save the world, get the girl, or win the day.

That's the message they respond to.

Ask: Are you positioning yourself as the guide?



4. AND GIVES THEM A PLAN

Let's recap:

1. You've identified what your audience wants, inviting them into a story.
2. You've identified a problem that makes them feel something, hooking them into the story.
3. You've positioned yourself as a guide, providing hope that they can solve their problem.

This is farther than most companies get with their customers, *but it's too soon to ask them for loyalty.*

If you ask for loyalty now, your audience can only see a yawning chasm between where they are and where they need to go. You need to give your customers a plan. Just three or four steps that explain how easy it is to work with you.

When you give your customers a plan, you're helping them overcome the barriers to their success.

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.)

Ask: Do you have a simple plan that makes it easy for your audience to trust you and have confidence in working with or following you?



5. THAT CALLS THEM TO ACTION

Will the hero 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 risk it and 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 Death Star.) Bridget Jones (Makes the call.)

Finally, the time has come to ask for or to posit the resolving action. Here's a few things to remember:

People don't take action unless they are challenged to take action and this challenge must be very, very clear.

We have to give our audience something to accept or reject.

Ask: Do you have a clear call to action?



6. THAT RESULTS IN A HAPPY ENDING

Whether or not a story ends happily, an audience must know what might happen if they are going to remain interested. We have to know the hero can either get or lose the girl, disarm the bomb or die trying, 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.)

This is a classic piece of storytelling. Heroes are compelled into action because something is at stake.

- Katniss volunteers for the Hunger Games to save her sister, Prim.
- A retired CIA officer must use all his past connections and skills to rescue his daughter from an abductor in *Taken*.
- Michael is thrust into his father’s world of the mafia when his father is shot in *The Godfather*.

None of these characters wanted to engage in the action of the story. They were compelled to in order to avoid a tragic ending (failure).

Ask: Have you communicated what’s at stake to your audience? What are the negative consequences of not listening to the guide?



7. OR A TRAGEDY

Careful screenwriters and novelists help us imagine dire consequences whether or not they actually happen because this builds suspense. You always have to build out the tragedy or your audience will 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)

People naturally steer toward a happy ending.

If you're not telling people what their life will look like when they listen to the guide, they're not going to engage with you.

Ask: How can you help your audience envision success?

HOW TO USE STORY 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 we use story structure in our life and work:

Writing a Book

If I'm writing a book, I use the same structure. Often, I'll repeat this plot structure several times within a chapter then I'll wrap up the chapter with either a happy or a tragic ending. Of course, 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.

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 and while their listening they are self-selecting.

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.

On Social Media

Social media is like a cave monster that's always consuming and never full. If you'd have asked me two years ago how to make heads or tails over curating an audience, engaging in meaningful ways, making sure you got in front of the right eyes at the right time I would have responded the way so many social media "gurus" do.

Content, content, content. Post more than your competition, post at the exact time based on some algorithm, make sure to engage with every comment... You've read the same blogs and books as I have. It's an overwhelming amount of work and the backend analytics are always changing.

Implementing the seven elements of the story structure to the various digital platforms has changed the way we play the game.

For example. On Instagram, we use the "stories" function to walk people through each of the seven elements. Seven "stories" for the day mean we've taken our followers through a full narrative.

On Facebook, we make sure to cover all the story elements in every post. Since we're moving the people along, most of the time, to a happy conclusion we're finding that there's less need for frequency of posting and more actual engagement. People like to follow and speak into what we're doing because they feel a sense of completion.

On LinkedIn we've pivoted to this system as well. In the articles we're producing, the video content we create, and of course the copy that accompanies our posts. Taking people on a start to finish journey of discovery negates the need for a hard sell and for a lot of bogus sales talk. Our followers, we've found, self-select in our stories and the conversation just kind of ebbs and flows from there.

Also... we hate twitter.

Introducing Myself

When somebody asks what I do for a living, I don't tell them I'm a storyteller and sociologist who runs a commercial filmmaking company. If I told them that, they'd just sit there and wonder what kind of stories I told and I'd get no filmmaking 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 speaker kind of floating around from thing to thing, not really confident that I was making any impact or reaching my actual potential. I was doing fine, but I realized nobody was reading what I wrote or listening to what I said unless they were already fans. I really wanted to reach a bigger audience and make a bigger "ding in the universe," but I didn't know how to do it. One night, sitting on my back deck with a thin, bearded man I shared my philosophical dilemma. I told him how I wanted to leave a legacy and make a measurable difference in the world but it seemed as if every book or article I wrote and every speaking engagement I had, the people loved my message but wouldn't remember it in a week. My book titles were elusive, my writing was poetic and hard to describe, my talks were informative and highly philosophical but not actionable. I realized then that I hadn't given my audience the right tools to spread the word or to take action themselves. I told him that I didn't want to spend the next 30 years just earning a paycheck or fighting gig to gig for income. Strangely, he felt similar and had experienced the same problems with his video production company. So we ended up meeting regularly, on my deck, through the night sometimes... and we did this for the better part of 9 months. What resulted was a brand-strategy using plot structures hollywood has been making billions off of for years. By the time we were done, we had created an entire process a business could go through to dominate their social media marketing and to tell better stories. And after we launched Beard & Bowler and went through the process for ourselves. We doubled in size in only 9 months. The results were phenomenal. And not only this, but once we formalized the process, businesses started asking us to help them with their digital campaign strategy and social media marketing. We've been able to work with Univision, we're talking with Colgate now... and we've been able to make the biggest difference for our Hero Non-Profits.

You know, I've told that story many times and I've never had anybody fail to understand what we do.

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 that story is an incredible tool I can use to understand my life.

Whenever I get a spare moment, I sit down and organize the events that took place over the last few weeks or months, and what's funny is, 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 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.