IRE Tipsheet
Beyond Words: Storytelling at the intersection of cool & creative
Ken Armstrong, The Marshall Project
karmstrong@themarshallproject.org; @bykenarmstrong

Tired of the same old same old? You know: anecdotal lead –> nut graph –> three-part series, all with lots and lots of words? Then turn your investigation into a web comic, or a work of performance art, or an awesome interactive graphic. Cool things can happen when we partner with poets, artists, musicians and web developers.

Collaborating is key. Make nice with people who can do things you can't. Befriend people who can draw, or perform, or who can write music or code.

Don't come up with a form – an investigation as musical! – and then go in search of material. Let the material dictate the form.

With interactive graphics, don't assume that there must be an accompanying story. Sometimes, the graphic *is* the story. (Same goes for videos and other storytelling devices.)

Getting resistance to writing long? Tuck all the information into an interactive graphic. A little here and a little here and a little here can add up to a lot. And with no word count, your editor won't know you've just slipped thousands of words by her. Example: Five thousand words are embedded in this landslide interactive from The Seattle Times.

Sometimes, humor is the best way to capture a story's absurdity. Here, The Marshall Project turns a Pentagon weapons giveaway program into the "Department of Defense Gift Guide 2014 (Just pay shipping and handling)."

Consider subscribing to the Atavist Magazine. You'll get tons of ideas.

Some examples of innovative approaches from around the country:

Music (both from ProPublica):
Fracking: The Music Video
Bet Against the American Dream (a song about collateralized debt obligations)
Sidenote: Here's a story from MTV News on rapper Mykki Blanco quitting music to pursue investigative reporting

Poetry:
This is Home (for a CIR investigation of public housing)
NewsPoet (NPR invites poets to write the day's news)
A truly special edition: In 2009, Haaretz, an Israeli newspaper, turned an entire edition over to poets and novelists. Read about it here and here. The approach was such a hit, the paper made it an annual thing.

Hitting the stage:
This is Home: The Play (for CIR's housing investigation)
Pop-Up Magazine (a CJR story about Pop-Up's embrace of performed journalism)
Alicia's Miracle (for a CIR investigation of the strawberry industry)

Web comics or graphic essays:
Stowaway (a story in the Atavist on an Ethiopian orphan's harrowing life story)
A Nieman Storyboard Q&A on Stowaway
Harsh Treatment (three graphic essays in the Chicago Tribune on residential treatment centers in Illinois)
Strange Border Kidnappings in Kosovo (Vice News, combining Michael Montgomery's reporting with Marina Luz's illustrations)

Website for Josh Neufeld (non-fiction comics artist)
A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge (one of Neufeld's works)
Illustrated Journalism (a story in Columbia Visuals with lots of insight and great links)
The Box (a graphic novel from CIR on teens in solitary confinement)

Melds:
NSA Files: Decoded, a series on Edward Snowden in The Guardian that does a gorgeous weave with video, interactive graphics and intelligence reports
In Jennifer's Room, a California Watch story that melds video, illustration, music and voice acting
Sidenote: Here's a terrific rundown from Josh Stearns (in his blog Groundswell) of online storytelling projects in 2014 notable for this kind of creativity

Virtual reality (from Fusion):
Michael Brown's death (combining journalism with gaming technology)
Nieman Storyboard on the above approach and immersive storytelling in general