How to Tell a True Story

Prof. Bruce Ballenger, Boise State University, 2017

Though some of us are better at it than others, we are all experienced storytellers. Narrative is how we make sense of experience. But why are some stories we hear more compelling that others? The answer lies in structure.

Breakfast to Bed Stories: The Problem with Simple Chronology

The basic problem to solve in telling a good story is simple: What to put in and what to leave out? How do we decide this? We often sidestep these questions by simply telling stories chronologically. First this happened, then that happened, and then that, and so on. The premise behind this approach is that the storyteller is merely trying to tell an audience "exactly what happened," and chronology is often how we experience things. But this approach immediately runs into problems for audiences because there's no way of knowing what information is important. Every event, scene, or explanation has equal meaning. Consequently, many "breakfast to bed stories" like this are uninteresting—they lack a clear purpose and sense of emphasis. It's unclear what they are about other than the obvious: to simply document what happened to the narrator. Usually, we don't find such stories very interesting.
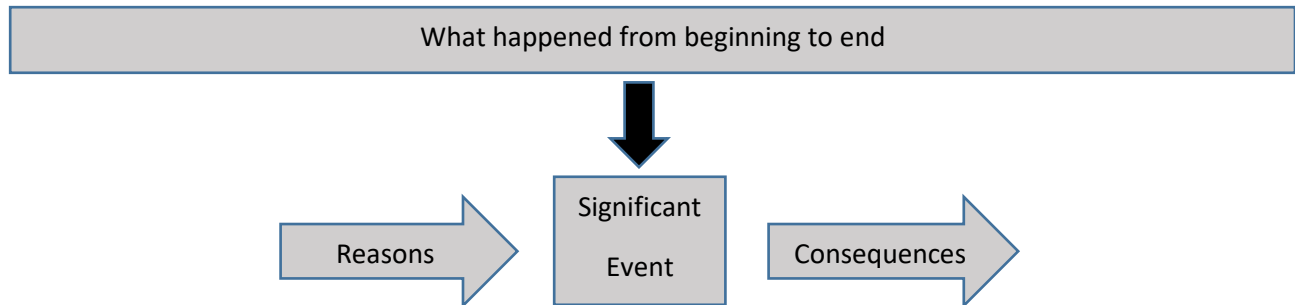
The Significant Event or Inciting Incident

Most stories are organized around a significant even or inciting incident—one *part* of the larger story that is particularly important to the narrator. But why? What is it about this event that makes it significant? Typically, it is an event that threw the narrator out of balance, that disrupted his or her world in some way, or challenged certain assumptions or beliefs. While this might be a dramatic or symbolic event—an unexpected death, the moment a friendship ended, sudden violence, or some symbolic rite of passage like first love—a significant event or inciting incident need not earth-shattering. It could be a relatively ordinary moment—a comment from a friend, the disruption of a daily routine, or unexpected encounter. Significant events are usual *categories of experience* that most of us recognize: coming of age, the attachment to place, the complications of loss, a test of courage, and so on. The key is that whatever happened—whether it's dramatic or ordinary-- is unsettling to narrators in ways that surprise them.   The puzzle is what caused the event and its potential consequences for the narrator. Stories are about untangling that mystery.

Exploring Causal Mysteries

Identifying what is the significant event isn't always easy. Writers often have to spend considerable time exploring their experiences to locate the moment or event that stands out in the chronology of what happened to them. But once narrators find it, the story arises from what was until then just another situation. What makes a story a story is that it explores reasons and consequences that might explain the meanings of a significant event: Why did a narrator feel, think, or act that way? How has the event changed things? What might it all mean? This is how we decide what to include in a story and what to leave out. Does the information help illuminate how and why the significant event happened or does it explain or show its consequences for the narrator? Everything else is irrelevant.

Assuming for a moment that we're telling a story about a single experience, let's review what we've discussed so far. First, from the many things that happened, we've chosen one that seems especially

significant. We'll structure the story around this, emphasizing either the story of why this event might have been significant (reasons) or how it changed things for the narrator (consequences), or both.

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Which of these things—reasons or consequences-- writers focus on in their telling of the story depends on which of these questions they find most compelling. For example, imagine that that the significant event in my story is the purchase of another pair of shoes that I really don't need, and in the end, didn't really want. What interests me is what is behind this impulse to buy things I don't need and want? That story will focus on reasons, and do it in two ways: *Show* the moments that led up to that significant event and *comment* on their possible meanings

Two Languages and Two Narrators

This last bit about commentary is really important. Unlike fiction, true stories both show *and* tell. In other words, we don't just render experience—trying to capture what exactly happened—but we also *explain* what we think of what happened, particularly what it helps us to see and understand about ourselves and our world. The language of rendering is usually very concrete and specific, like this description of my father when I was a teenager.

> Booze makes the eyelids lazy, and when he looked at me from under that dark brow, his pupils were half-covered—the body's signal that it, too, knew the brain could not be trusted. "I have not been drinking," he said when I confronted him in the dim light of the kitchen. So I checked the bottles in the cabinet above the stove, and I saw that though the vodka was even with the black marks I'd left, the bottle was full of water.

The language of thought is little more general and *expository*, like this:

> When I returned home, and he was drunk, I looked for anger and couldn't find it. My dad was drinking a lot in those days, and I felt responsible for doing something about it. This made me crazier than it made him, and that sucked the anger out.

We more naturally tell true stories in both the language of rendering and the language of thought when we imagine that while there is obviously only one person telling the story, there are actually *two* narrators, each separated by time. The first, the *then-narrator*, tells the story of what happened, trying

to recreate the world as it was. The other is the *now-narrator,* who comments from the present. This narrator can look back on what happened with an understanding that the then-narrator did not possess.

Here's another way of thinking about these two narrators: The journey metaphor is commonly used to describe storytelling; narrators describe their quests to resolve the mystery of how and why their lives were thrown out of balance in an attempt to get things back to normal. This involves describing two kinds of actions: external and internal. External actions describe events that the narrator experienced during the journey. Internal action captures what the narrator was thinking when these events occurred *and* looking back at them now.

So What?

These two narrators collaborate to address the question that all true stories must address: so what? Why should anyone else care about what happened to us and what we think about it? Since most people are already hesitant to share stories about themselves with a wider audience, these questions can intimidate many from speaking at all. But answering the "so what?" question is why stories are a source of discovery from both writer and audience, particularly if they help illuminate, in some small way, the things we all share about being human. A story about someone's compulsive shoe-buying is also a story about what drives us all to acquire things. A story about one drunk father is a story about living with drunk fathers. In other words, we tell stories not just about what happened but *what happens*. Identifying what category of experience best describes our significant event helps us to ferret out the larger themes in our story that we might want to say something about.

Three Act Structure

We have a motive for telling a true story: To unravel the mystery of the causes and/or consequences of a significant event in our lives. In doing so, we hope to discover something, however modest, that will speak in some small way to the lives of others. The method of discovery is to deploy two narrators, a remembered self and a remembering self, one that recreates what happened and one that looks back with the understanding that wasn't available then.

Let's return now to structure. How might we order the events that make up the story we're telling?

To state the obvious, stories typically have beginnings, middles, and ends. In drama, we often describe these as Acts 1, 2, and 3. However, that doesn't really help us at all unless we describe the *purposes* of each Act. Since the beginning of a story needs to establish the narrator's purpose in telling the story, then Act 1 frames "the trouble" the narrator hopes to resolve. This might include the significant event— I suddenly realized one day that I buy shoes I don't need and want—and the stakes involved for the narrator (and audience): What does this say about me (and us)? Act 1 should dramatically establish the mystery the story hopes to resolve and the narrator's motives for resolving it. How was the narrator's life thrown out of balance? Naturally, Act 2 describes the action—internal and external—as the narrator goes about establishing how things got to be this way and what he or she is trying to do about it. This usually involves confronting obstacles—experiences or information that complicate things—as well as moments that push the story forward towards resolution, which of course is the domain of Act 3. By the end of the story, narrators should be prepared to say what they understand now that they didn't understand when the story began. How has the narrator changed, if at all? Resolutions are rarely neat or complete. Mystery often remains.

Act 1	•What is the "trouble?" •What big question does this raise? •How was the narrator's life thrown out of balance?
Act 2	•How did this happen? What are the consequences? •What does the narrator attempt to do? •What are the obstacles and the points of insight?
Act 3	•What does the narrator understand now that he or she didn't when story began? •How has the narrator changed? •What is still a mystery?

The Importance of Being Honest

The difference between a dull story and an interesting one comes down to writers' motives: Do they just want to tell what happened or do they seek to explore the mystery of why something significant happened and what it means? In the absence of mystery—and the possibility of discovery for both narrator and audience—a personal story is nothing more than a situation: this happened to me. [1] But good stories need something else, too, and that's honesty. The most appealing stories are told by narrators who are more aware of what they don't know than by what they do. This is what guides a writer towards the most promising material. We tell true stories to better understand our experiences; it makes little sense, then, to tell a story whose meaning we have already figured out, which often comes off as just a performance meant to impress. The reward of discovery is insight, which however modest, should seem *earned.* Most of us love reading true stories where we sense that the narrator has tried hard to understand something. This is more likely if two conditions are met: the material the writer chooses raises questions that aren't easily answered, and the writer is willing to suspend judgment long enough to get at some small truths.   The best true stories, then, begin with the choice of material—itchy subjects that make their writers a little uncomfortable. To write true stories, then, is to be looking for trouble.

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[1]Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story.* Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2002.