The Elements of Good Storytelling

by Kimberly Appelcline

People are natural-born storytellers. All of us.

Ever since a particularly clever caveman drew stick figures on a wall to record the details of his hunting expedition, people have been telling each other tales. We do it every day; and I’m not just talking about the people who write novels and make movies. We all do it: in bars and in restaurants, over the phone and in our emails and letters and diaries. When you tell a friend about the funny thing that happened to you on Friday night, or about how your car got that dent in the right fender, you take the seemingly random events of your life and you give them shape. How did you find out you were allergic to grapefruit? How did you get that scar on your upper lip? How did you meet your best friend? Why did you quit your job? We tell stories all the time, without even being aware that we’re doing it.

How’d They Do That?

We’ve all experienced bad storytelling: the movie that was so boring you walked out in the middle, the book you could never seem to get into, the co-worker who always forgets the punchline to the joke, the uncle who’s always going off on tangents until he loses his point completely. We sigh, we shift position in our chairs, we look out the window. When will this person stop talking?

But we’ve also all experienced good storytelling: the novel that kept you up all night because you couldn’t wait to find out what would happen, the movie you saw three times and then bought on videotape, the television show you look forward to all week, the friend who people tend to gather around at parties, the grandfather who makes up outlandish and wonderful bedtime stories off the top of his head. They hold our interest, we can’t tear ourselves away, we lose track of the outside world. We are enthralled.

Those of us who want to tell stories – whether in print, on film, or at parties – look at stories and storytellers like these and wonder, “How do they do it?” Well, some of it’s just talent, but it also requires skill at using the five main tools of the storyteller’s trade:

- **setting** – Where is this story happening?
- **character** – Who’s the story about?
- **plot** – What’s happening?
- **backstory** – What happened before, to create and inform this situation?
- **detail** – Which specific things should your audience notice?

In this article, we’ll briefly look at each of these tools to explore what they are, how they work, and how you can use them to tell better stories. We’ll approach the topics primarily from the viewpoint of fiction writing, though the same tools can be used – with differing degrees of emphasis – for any type of storytelling.

**Setting**

The first tool in your storytelling toolbox is setting. Where is your story taking place? A story set in a prison raises very different expectations than one set at a Buddhist monastery. The setting tells your audience valuable information about the characters, and also about what sort of action they might expect to take place. You may (and hopefully will) surprise them, but at least you’ve given them a rug to stand on before you pull it out from under them.
One of the keys to writing good settings is props. There’s an old saying along the lines of “If there’s a gun over the mantle in Act 1, it has to go off by the end of the play.” Now, a gun over the mantle has become a cliché, but it’s a good example how setting can enable plot. If that gun hadn’t been over the mantle in Act 1, no one would have had the opportunity to use it later in the play.

In writing your setting, you have the chance to create the opportunity for later action and drama in your story. You might include something large, like a pit, or a lion. Or it might be something small, like a pearl earring sitting on the coffee table. You might not know, when you place it in your setting, what purpose the item will serve. But characters often have minds of their own, and if you set them loose in an interesting setting full of potential for action, you’ve increased the chances of something interesting happening. Whatever you choose to create, your setting and the items within it can play an important role in helping your story take shape and move forward in interesting ways.

Character

Okay, so you’ve written an interesting setting, but now what’s going to happen? Nothing’s going to happen without characters. Your characters make the story happen; they perform actions, make choices, interact with their setting to cause interesting results. So who is your story about? And why should your audience care about what happens to them? If you’re telling a story about a boring person, it’s going to be difficult to hold your audience’s attention, no matter how fascinating the setting. So you’ll make your own task easier if you create a character who interests you, makes you (and, likely, your audience) curious to learn more.

One good way to create an interesting character is to create a character whose personality includes some contradictions. In the real world, there are few purely good or purely evil people, few who are purely selfish or purely rational or purely anything. People are complicated. That’s what makes them interesting. And so characters should be complicated, too.

That doesn’t mean you need to know everything about your character, especially not at the very start. Maybe you just come up with the idea that she’s very kind, but also vain ... or that he’s stubborn, ethical, and has a weakness for blondes. But make sure to leave some room for your character to develop, because another thing that makes a character interesting is potential for change, whether that potential is ever realized or not. It’s the potential that matters, because it helps to keep your audience interested, wondering what this character is going to do next.

So, say you’ve got a rough sketch of a character whose personality includes some contradictions, and who seems to have some potential for change. Now what do you do with her? How do you communicate to an audience these ideas you’ve expressed in your mental character sketch? That’s easy. You’ve got three primary sub-tools within characterization:

- appearance
- dialogue
- actions

Your character’s appearance, though the least powerful of these three sub-tools, can communicate some useful information to your audience. Is his hair dyed green? Is she wearing a ballerina’s tu-tu? If she is wearing a tu-tu, is she a svelte twenty-year-old or a pudgy five-year-old or a frail eighty-year-old?

Dialogue communicates character even more effectively to your audience, since it allows your characters to speak for themselves. Does she use dialect, jargon, or slang? Does he have a stutter? Does she make rude, judgmental pronouncements? Does he talk for long stretches without letting anyone else get a word in edgewise? What your characters say and how they say it can tell your audience a lot about them.

Your characters’ actions – the third sub-tool – define them most powerfully of all. A character may be
young and handsome, smile winningly, describe himself as kind, and talk charmingly with every other character in your story, but if he then savagely kicks a helpless old woman, your audience will draw their own conclusions.

Plot

Plot is what “happens” in your story, and your characters’ actions are an important part of it. An old saying among fiction writers is “Character is plot,” meaning that all good plots develop as a result of choices and actions resulting from the interaction of personalities in a story. Plot should not be something imposed upon characters, but rather something that grows out of their choices.

And yet, as I said, your characters’ actions are only one important part of plot. Plot is something more: It’s the overall arc of your story, including external events that happen to the characters as well as and in combination with their own actions and choices.

One easy way to think of plot is as a 3-step process:

1. set-up
2. build-up
3. pay-off

So, in the early part of your story, you need to set up your plot: introduce the characters and setting, communicate to your audience the situation in which the story begins, and present some sort of problem or tension. You then build up that tension, perhaps with events that challenge the characters in unexpected ways. And finally, often after a few rounds of build up, you must provide your audience with some sort of pay-off.

Since fairy tales are good examples of nearly pure plot, we can walk through these three steps using the familiar tale of Cinderella:

1. set-up: Cinderella is at the mercy of her evil step-mother and step-sisters. There is going to be a ball, which they don’t want to let her attend.

2. build-up:
   a. Cinderella finds a way to attend the ball in disguise.
   b. She meets the prince and they fall in love.
   c. She flees at midnight and returns to her slavery, without the prince ever learning her identity.
   d. The prince searches and searches, but cannot find her.

3. pay-off: The prince finally does find her and makes her a princess.

One of the most important keys to plot is motion. You must make sure to keep your story in motion toward some end. Notice how each stage of the build-up not only escalates the tension, but keeps the plot moving toward the pay-off. Without motion, action, tension, and change – however subtle – your story will stagnate. Your audience will begin to squirm in their seats, look out the window, and wonder when the story will end. And that is not a happy ending to any tale.

One of the other keys to plot is significant consequences. Your audience will still get bored with your story if it’s in constant motion, but the motion has no potential to cause changes that will truly matter. The consequences don’t have to be earth-shattering – they don’t have to mean the difference
between a life of slavery and becoming a princess – but they do need to matter in the world of the characters, and you do need to build toward them from the very beginning and throughout your story.

Yet another key to writing good plot is **coherence**. The plot of your story should hang together as one piece, regardless of the number of sub-plots or mini-climactic moments. Your audience should feel that they are hearing one coherent story, with a beginning, middle, and end. The amount of digression you can get away with along the way depends primarily on the length of the story. In a 500-page novel, you can probably tell numerous sub-stories, including various sub-plots that don’t relate directly to the central movement of the story. But if you’re telling a 5-minute anecdote at a party, digressions will glaze your listeners’ eyes over before you’ve even noticed what’s happening. When in doubt, stay on track: stick with plot events that move the action forward toward the pay-off.

**Backstory**

Remember that pearl earring I mentioned back in the section on setting? Well, it’s unlikely to be of much use in your story unless it has some backstory, some history behind it. Perhaps it’s evidence of the husband’s illicit affair, or the teenaged daughter stole it from her mother’s jewelry box, or it bears a curse which will affect its wearer, or whatever your imagination comes up with. This backstory might never be explicitly stated in the story, or it might be openly discussed. Either way, it crucially affects the progress of the story.

One example of effective usage of backstory for setting comes from the film “The Blair Witch Project,” in which the three characters hear tales – early in the film – of a man who lived in an isolated house where he killed several children in mysterious circumstances. When the characters – late in the film – happen upon a deserted old house in the woods, the audience remembers the backstory and understands the significance. This example shows backstory (the tales of past murders) working together with setting (the abandoned house and its contents) and plot (the characters’ arrival at the house and their behavior within it) to create potential significant consequences.

In fact, significant consequences often depend largely on backstory. The consequences of a man’s discovery of the pearl earring on the coffee table would vary widely, depending on who the earring had belonged to and how it got there. It’s a rare story that starts at the true beginning. Most stories throw their audience into the middle of events, when things have become interesting, when a turning point is near, and that means there’s plenty of backstory.

And backstory continues to accumulate as a story charges ahead. Half-way through the story, your character receives an antique sword. Well, where did this sword come from? What’s its story? Your hero meets an enchantress. Where did she come from? What’s her story? You don’t necessarily need to explicitly tell your audience the backstory, but it should be there, leaking through to inform and develop the characters (What happened to them in their lives before this story began?), the settings (What happened here before? And how does it affect the present drama?), and of course the plot (What important events preceded the beginning of the story? And how do all of these backstories work together to create significant consequences?).

**Detail**

Like backstory, detail interacts with all of the other tools in the storyteller’s toolbox. You must give details about the characters, setting, events, and backstory of your tale in order to bring your story vividly to life in the imaginations of your audience. The good storyteller throws in plenty of juicy details – the way a character walks, the color of the living room rug, the expression on a character’s face, the song playing on the radio. But there are two main questions to ask yourself when putting detail into a story:

- **How many** details do you need?
  and
- **Which** details do you need?
As with the coherence of plot, the answer to the first question lies primarily in the length of the story. A 500-page novel allows for levels of detail that would be simply ridiculous (and impossible) in a 5-minute anecdote told at a party. You don’t want to leave your audience confused by the vagueness of your tale, but neither do you want to give them a 30-minute description of a landscape where a relatively unimportant, 5-minute scene will take place. While in a novel you might be able to explore and describe the subtlest details of a character’s psyche, in a brief anecdote you may only be able to single him out as “the guy with the cigar.” And, depending on the intent of your story, that will probably be fine. In order to get the punchline of most jokes, an audience doesn’t need to hear a lot of descriptive details, and in fact they would overwhelm and ruin the effect. So you must gauge the appropriate number of details for your story, based on its length and your intended audience reaction.

But even in a 500-page novel, a storyteller must choose details carefully, because they focus the audience’s attention. Mystery writers love to detail unimportant props and actions, in order to prolong the mystery by misleading their readers. The reader quite naturally thinks, consciously or not, “That vase on the nightstand must be important, or why would they have mentioned it?” If that vase actually isn’t important, don’t tell us what color it is, or reveal a character’s thoughts about it, or describe the moment when the hero places it there, or otherwise call attention to it, unless – like the mystery writer – you have a darned good reason for doing so. Misleading your readers about what is important in your story is okay, as long as it’s intentional and purposeful, but you should try at all costs to avoid confusing your audience accidentally through superfluous detail.

**Putting It All Together**

Clearly, good storytelling does not mean using these tools – setting, character, plot, backstory, and detail – separately and in isolation from each other. Rather, a good storyteller weaves them together to produce a story in which they are often indistinguishable to the rapt audience.

Think again about the various types of stories people tell every day – think back to that story I mentioned, about why you quit your job. Well, even a simple story like this uses the same general techniques as the Great American Novel. You want to tell your audience a bit about the office and your co-workers, describe your former boss a bit, quote some of the annoying things she said to you, describe some of the small events that lead up to that fateful day, and end with the big scene where you stormed out of the building and slammed the door. You want to give a bit of backstory throughout where necessary, without straying too far from your point, and make sure to throw in a few good details (remember the vein bulging in your boss’s forehead?). Using the tools from the storyteller’s toolbox, you take the people and places and events in your mind – in your memory and in your imagination – and you sift through them, choose the ones that are relevant, condense them, organize them, and turn them into a tale that rewards your audience for listening, and makes them want to hear more.

This article presents only a brief introduction to each of the storyteller’s tools, but the following articles will explore each in more advanced detail, including exercises to help you use these tools more effectively in your own storytelling. We’ll discuss how to determine how many and which details your story needs, strategies for writing interesting settings, various different types of plots, and more. Watch for the rest of the articles in this series:

- Writing Dynamic Settings
- Creating Vivid Characters
- Plot Strategies
- Imagining Backstory

http://www.skotos.net/articles/GoodStorytelling.html