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Seven Steps Of Digital Storytelling

During the first few years of our workshops, we would discuss with participants what made a story a digital story, and what made a digital story a good digital story. We came up with an initial lecture, the Seven Elements, that outlined the fundamentals of digital storytelling. We discovered that presenting them at the beginning of workshops greatly improved the process and the stories told.

Our emphasis in this introductory process started with a simple idea. Show an example, and briefly discuss the relative merit of the piece using one or more of the elements. The main goal of this section of the workshop was to creatively inspire the storytellers.

As our organization developed a national and international audience, the Seven Elements were often used by countless facilitators, and cited frequently in references to the CDS model. Internally, many of our own teachers began to adapt and amend the lecture in ways that suggested we needed to revise and rethink our approach.

For the last two years, we have given this lecture as the Seven Steps. This edition represents our current thinking about these components of storymaking. They were never meant as a prescribed "catechism" of storytelling, more simply a framework for the discussion of the aesthetic quality of this particular form.

During our group process called the story circle, which is discussed at length later in the book, these steps are often called upon to form clarifying questions to aid the storyteller in their process. What meaning and insight comes from the story? How does talking about it make them feel? Is there a scene, a moment, which acts as an axis point, to illustrate change?

Increasingly, we are moving our participants into a mindset where they can more fully visualize their story, and imagine how it sounds, before they even begin to write their script. So what images do the storytellers see, and what music or ambient sound do they hear? And finally how might the elements interweave in the edit, and where might the story end up in the world, and how could this change the story when the process is complete? After the story circle is completed, and the storyteller has had some time alone with his or her thoughts, they can then let all of these considerations inform them as they sit down to write.

We want stories. We love stories. Stories keep us alive. Stories that come from a place of deep insight and with a knowing wink to their audience, and stories that tease us into examining our own feelings and beliefs, and stories that guide us on our own path. But most importantly, stories told as stories, that honor the simple idea that we want to relive what the author experienced in time and place.

Step 1: Owning Your Insights

At seven, I learned about race.

Johnny Ramirez always got into trouble.

One morning, on a dare, we convinced Johnny to cut up an old bull snake and throw the pieces of it into the pickle barrel in front of Johnson's store.

We just ran away.

...

I spent my first six years on the west side of San Antonio, in a Mexican neighborhood. Then we moved to Vickery, an odd small town, surrounded by North Dallas. There were not many Latinos.

...

I remember later that day looking out the window of Mrs. Morgan's class and seeing Johnny's mom taking him home from school, latched on to his ear like a lobster. Johnny was crying, "Ay, Mama, let go, let go!"

Several of us giggled and snickered under our breaths. "Quiet class!" Mrs. Morgan apparently failed to see the humor.

Later that day we went to his house, and his mom came out to meet us, and spoke in Spanish, telling us to scram. As we left, my other Anglo friends started making fun of his mom, in loud voices, mocking her in their own version of a Spanglish. They burst out laughing. I just stood there.

I didn't think it was funny.

Johnny's family was never really welcome in Vickery. Later that year, they moved out of the neighborhood. Johnny wasn't missed.

But I never forgot.

For each and every storyteller, we are focused on creating a story that feels unique and powerful. Unique in that we hear the author describe the events and issues of the story in a way that is only theirs to provide, that the perspective feels like it emerged from honest self-reflection. Powerful in that we want the stories to give an intimate glance at the struggle the author faced in reacting to events, how the events changed them. Put another way, we want to help storytellers move through a process of self-discovery about the why of their story.

After asking "What's the story you want to tell?", our next question is "What do you think your story means?" We want to hear not just what the story is about in the obvious sense: "It's about my mom, my vacation, my first real job ..." But what it's really about is the storyteller, as the person who lived through the story, takes some particular lesson from the experience, a lesson that serves them in some way in negotiating their lives in the world.

In this example, the story process could have started as an essay about growing up in this one neighborhood in Dallas. The resulting draft might have been a series of broadly told memories of my childhood inspired by a group of old photos. But suppose I was asked, "why are these experiences coming up for you?" And I realized I have been thinking a great deal about how different my own children's experience of life was from my own – in particular, the relative tolerance of the San Francisco Bay area compared to 1960s Texas. So the story evolves to a specific experience where I was taught about race. With this new clarity of purpose, I was able to take my 1,000-word essay, with many stories about many characters, to a 200-word story about Johnny told in three scenes. Purpose provides that path.

We realize finding and clarifying your story's insight is not easy. There may not be a light bulb flashing above your head at the start of the process. How can you best find your way toward a deeper insight?

One way is to consider what jumps out for you in the story right now. All stories told, if they come from deep inside us, can be said to be about this moment. The shadow of your current life shapes the story. I might tell the Johnny Ramirez story fifteen ways over my lifetime, but the small changes, the ways the story shifts in emphasis and tone, express something different about me as the author.

The writing process, as a form of self-reflection, can move you from an awareness of "I am" to a deeper awareness of "I have been ... I am becoming ... I am ... and I will be ..." As life proceeds and is reflected upon, how you have been shaped by experience can be better understood. The stories have the chance to ripen. Stories that may have confused a storyteller for years, that have held dormant insights, might now bear the fruit of new knowledge.

My story might have also changed because someone just before me in a story circle talked about facing their own issues around discrimination. A group process invites us to see how our stories are connected. As you process out loud with others, the heart of the story may come to light, elucidating new layers of meaning. Which is why the story circle is often critical for a storyteller's writing process.

Insight is related to many other questions that can arise for the storyteller. Even if you address the core insight and unique voice for the story, you may still feel you need to shape the story for a specific audience, or a specific purpose. You may also feel the story may need more context to be understood.

In our experience, if you burden the beginning of your process with the external expectations, you can easily interrupt or edit the little voice inside your head that is working through why the story has great personal meaning for you. You may stop short of mining the depths, because you are concerned about your own safety, privacy, and confidentiality. We argue, as we address in Step Seven, about sharing your story, that the beginning of the process, while holding the awareness of purpose in terms of themes you may want to address, should not be driven by the external outcome, or the need for context. The story should be told as you would to a dear friend, a loved one, with a minimum of context, and a maximum of directness about the events as they happened. Then, as you complete a strong draft, you can consider those issues more fully, in how the shared story needs to be re-framed for the audience.

Telling an Organizational Story

But what if the story you're trying to tell isn't really yours? What if it's not about "my" anything: my job, my mom, or my vacation." And instead, it's about "ours?" "Our life together, our divorce?" Or what if it's about "theirs?" "Their community center, their after-school program?" What then?

Here's Esperanza's journey of how she found and clarified the story she wanted and needed to tell:

> Esperanza has decided to make a story about her non-profit, Familias Unidas, a community organization assisting low-income Latino families with negotiating the social service systems.
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> From the organizational brochure, and from all the grant proposals she has written, she has a great deal of information about why her organization exists and why it deserves continued community support. She also has ten years of photographs from her work with community members, special events, staff members, and the several times the organization has been recognized with awards.
>
> But as she thinks about the purpose of her story, she realizes that the organization's mission statement fails to capture the emotional essence of what they truly do, or why she's even a part of it. If the digital story is going to be presented to their supporters at the Christmas fundraiser, and then be placed on the website, it needs to move people and not just present a list of activities, goals, and objectives.
>
> Esperanza decides to create a portrait of the Sanchez family, one of the families Familias Unidas has worked with. When she goes to meet with them, they express interest, but as they talk about the role of Familias Unidas in their lives, Esperanza realizes their story only touches on one or two of the six programs the organization offers. She realizes that she needs several families to capture a broad enough view about the organization in order to connect with the different stakeholders in her communities of support. "This is so much work," she thinks, "and this will never get done."
>
> She is the director of the program, and as it is, she barely has time to work on the project. That night, she speaks with her partner, Carolina, who laughs about how Esperanza is always getting overwhelmed. "This is just like how you started the whole thing, fresh out of college," Carolina says. "You were just full of ideals. You started helping a few of your cousin's friends get some paperwork turned in for the local clinic, and the next thing I know, you were helping everyone in the barrio. You hardly slept then."
>
> Esperanza remembered these times, how passionate she felt, and how her passion inspired others to take up this work and to give donations to support it. "Maybe that's the story," she says aloud, "not just what we do, but why we do it, why I do it, and how caring starts with just one person."
>
> She calls her cousin and asks if he would be willing to tell the story of those first projects. He says he would be honored. She starts writing, and the words flow. From this beginning story, she connects the Sanchez family's experience to

show how the program became legitimized, and she finishes with a reflection on her own growth and the gifts that this work has given her.

At midnight, she closes her laptop. Esperanza sees the movie playing in her head. "I know just the images to use."

Whether the story starts as deeply personal, or like Esperanza, evolves to have a strong personal connection, as facilitators, we are working to hold the space for your movement toward deeper and clearer insight. This work is never easy. It can be humbling for the facilitator. But it can also be enriching, enlivening and inspiring in every way.

Step 2: Owning Your Emotions

Sue was the third person to present an idea in the story circle. She was proud of the fact that she had prepared a draft of a script. She opened her laptop, and started to read, but all of the sudden it was if a ghost had taken her voice. She tried to say the words, but her voice cracked, nothing came out. She sat back, tears welling in her eyes. "I did not think I was that emotional about this story, but I just can't say these words ... I just can't."

This is common experience for story facilitators. Even with scripts that have taken what appeared to be a neutral attitude on a personal subject, the emotional power underneath the words can ooze out of us. Our most important stories tap into the profound, and sometimes our bodies know this better than our conscious mind.

As a first step, we help storytellers find and clarify the meaning contained within their stories, but even as they work through the subject and theme, we want to help them become aware of how the story feels – the emotional resonance of their story. In this way, meaning and emotion are intertwined.

Just as the process of landing on the story's principal insight unveils itself over your writing process, so does the depth of emotion that of the story. Big emotions may surface at the beginning of your process, that you may feel are inappropriate for the story you imagine sharing. But only by listening to those emotions, owning they exist and are part of the reason you are drawn to this particular version of the story, can you effectively tackle a process of refinement of your tone and a deeper perspective on what you are asking the story to achieve.

To help storytellers identify the emotions in their story, we ask a series of questions regarding their process: "As you shared your story, or story idea, what emotions did you experience? Can you identify at what points in sharing your story you felt certain emotions? If you experienced more than one emotion, were they contrasting?"

As the storyteller gains awareness of their emotional connection to the story, they can begin to think about how others might connect on an emotional level. To help storytellers decide how to convey emotional content, we ask a second set of questions: "Which emotions will best help the audience understand the journey contained within your story? Is there an overall tone that captures a central theme? Can you convey your emotions without directly using "feeling" words or relying on

clichés to describe them? For example, how can you imply the idea of happiness without saying, 'I felt happy?'"

When we reflect on the emotions within in our stories, we realize that they can be complex, and with this realization we oftentimes discover deeper layers of a story's meaning. For example, stories of wedding celebrations can also be about overcoming loneliness and facing new struggles in forging lasting partnerships. Joyous births can also be about working through the fear of shouldering new responsibility. Restful vacations can also be about recognizing the stress that shapes our daily lives. Grieving the loss of a loved one can also be about appreciating the wisdom that they have imparted. Thus having an awareness of the contrasting and complex nature of a story's emotional content will not only help get us in touch with the core of the story's meaning, but also determine which emotions to include, and in what sequence to present them to help the audience understand the story.

Taking ownership of the emotions contained within a story will also help the audience connect on a deeper level. But the inclusion of emotions doesn't mean that your audience will meaningfully connect to it, so emotion alone is not the goal. When we, as an audience, hear a story that has an exaggerated tug to emotion, we read it as dishonesty. Conversely, if it seems devoid of emotion, without a hint of struggle or conflict, then we don't believe it either.

So when a storyteller wants the audience to pause long enough to listen, to listen deeply and trust them as a storyteller, they have to convey a sense of awareness and ownership of the emotions contained with their story. We want to help the storytellers be as aware of their emotions as they can be, and demonstrate to the audience that they believe in what they are saying, and are "in" their story. Unless the storyteller trusts that the audience will connect with the underlying issues of their story, they may not be fully honest with themselves or the audience.

Most audiences know that if the storyteller chooses to leave out information and describes details through inference instead of evidence, then there must be a good reason. But they can also tell the difference between being reticent and indirect, and being purposely superficial. The storyteller may or may not want to disclose intimate details, but it is beneficial for them to demonstrate a respect for their audience.

In story work, as a storyteller reflects on their sense of what the story is about and becomes aware of its emotional content, they must also choose the just-so voice that suits it. And rather than using language constructed for a society that can be judgmental and threatening, the storyteller instead peels back the protective layers and finds the voice that conveys their emotional honesty, as if speaking to a trusted friend.

Within every community, and within every shared experience, there are many different ideas of what it means to disclose information. Therefore, knowing your intended audience can shape the emotional content of your story. The degree of emotional content is also culturally specific, as storytellers are familiar with the codes and clues within their own communities. When a storyteller trusts that they are listening deeply to their own heart and imagines the thoughtful appreciation of a specific audience, they will share what is appropriate to share.

People are rarely presented with opportunities for deep, connected listening, and if they are presented with them, they often don't take the opportunity to listen

with a depth that matches that of the speaker's. Therefore, our practice is predicated on providing a safe space for telling and listening to emotionally honest stories. Stories that emerge in this sacred space of deep listening can source our emotional core, and can surprise both the teller and the listener. Storytellers in our workshops often choose to address difficult issues – to wink at, stare, and sometimes engage, the demons inside. When you visit the www.storycenter.org website and view the digital stories we have chosen to share, you will see that they are diverse in theme but consistent in their emotional honesty. To paraphrase Boston-based storyteller, the late Brother Blue, the stories feel like they are traveling the shortest distance from the heart of the storyteller to the viewer's own heart.

Step 3: Finding The Moment

> A story isn't about a moment in time, a story is about the moment in time.
> W. D. Wetherell

We borrow a truism from John Gardner that the plots of all stories can be boiled down to one of two types: 1) "A stranger came to town..." or 2) "We went on a vacation."

In other words, at some moment in your life, change came to you or you went towards change. As you become clear about the meaning of your story, you can bring your story to life, by taking us into that moment of change.

But out of the sequence of events in your narrative, which event best shows how you came to new insight, what forced you into a new perspective about the subject. I have a writing prompt, start a sentence with "The phone rang ..." and talk about a time when the phone rang and you heard news that changed you forever. Almost all of us have moments with the stranger, as a bringer of good news or bad news, that arrive with a phone call.

To help storytellers find this moment, we ask a series of questions: "Was there a moment when things changed? Were you aware of it at the time? If not, what was the moment you became aware that things had changed? Is there more than one possible moment to choose from? If so, do they convey different meanings? Which most accurately conveys the meaning in your story? Can you describe the moment in detail?" Once this moment of change is identified, we help storytellers determine how it will be used to shape the story.

Because our lives comprise an infinite number of moments of small shifts in perspective, of evolving, rather than distinct or dramatic shifts, we often find it hard to point to a moment. In the decisive moment writing prompt (see Chapter 7), we force the issue, and people will tend to write about a dramatic event. Ironically, while the "phone rang" might seem like the best moment to land the story in a specific event, it might be a month or a year later, when you are making toast, or driving to work, or any number of otherwise mundane moments of quiet reflection, when the full weight of what happened finally comes to clarity. Particularly with traumatic events, shock and working through the stages of grief means you may not be self-aware about the importance or meaning of the change for months or years.

Whether the storyteller became aware of it at the time or in reflection, we want to help them find the moment of change that best represents the insight that they wish to convey. In the Johnny Ramirez story, I present three moments: Johnny being dared to throw the snake in the barrel, Johnny being taken home from school by his mother, and being at his house and having other kids make fun of his family's Spanish. The moments build upon each other; at the beginning of the story I was part of group that set Johnny up, and later I laughed at him as he was being dragged home by his mother. The turning point was when I chose not to laugh at my friends making fun of Johnny's family speaking Spanish. Landing in that moment shows how I changed, shows my response in a situation. In hindsight, I could see that by not joining my peers taunting, I was choosing to be different. I took a vacation from the social norm.

Compelling stories reproduce the events in an immersive way. They prompt the audience to ask questions about their own experiences and look for larger truths. Compelling storytellers construct scenes to show how change happened, how they dealt with it, what they were like before the change, and what they are like after. A storyteller sharing their insight within a story says to the audience, "This is what has happened and this is what I have learned." By building a scene around the moment of change, the storyteller is "showing," rather than "telling."

"Showing" through scene is part of the pleasure for the audience as they are drawn into the moment of change and actively construct their own interpretations. If you can paint the audience a portrait of both you, and your experience of the moment of change, then you are creating a scene. As you recall the moment of change, ask yourself these questions: What do you see? What do you hear? What's being said? What are your thoughts? What are your feelings? What is the context behind your feelings? Have you been in this situation before or since? Have you been in these surroundings, or had these thoughts or feelings before or since? When? Is that part of this story?

How much of a scene you build around the moment of change, how you integrate that scene into the story, and the total number of scenes depends on how much information the audience needs to know in order to understand. What happened before that moment, what happened after? Does the audience need more or less information? What are the key details that will help the audience appreciate the moment of change? Over the course of a three- to five-minute piece, a digital story can consist of a single scene, or it can consist of several. Because the format is relatively short, it's important to select your scenes with care and establish them concretely to ensure that they are contributing to the overall piece.

As the audience, we uncover meaning in the way the storyteller has shaped their story. The events of the story lead us to conclusions but don't constrict our own discovery, and the moment of change and the scenes built around it lead the audience to a river of understanding. However, they are the ones who have to jump in. And in this way they become participants in the narrative; to make that jump, to fill that void.

Step 4: Seeing Your Story

Finding the moment of change in your story and describing it within a scene is the starting point to telling the story as a story. However, because we help storytellers

share their stories in the form of a digital story, we also want to look at how the use of visuals and sound bring things to life for the audience. There are many choices that come along with designing how the audience will "see" and "hear" the digital story. Let's begin with visuals. We discuss visual choices early in the story conception process so that storytellers consider how the use of images will shape their story. In order to "see" their story, we help storytellers describe the images that come to mind, understand what those images convey, find or create those images, and then determine how best to use them to convey their intended meaning.

As part of this process of creating a visual narrative, we ask storytellers: "What images come to mind when recalling the moment of change in the story? What images come to mind for other parts of the story?" At this point in the process, we want storytellers to simply call these images to mind, whatever they are, without being concerned about whether or not they exist as actual photos. Next, we want storytellers to explore the meaning that these images convey, and so we ask them: "Why this image? What is it conveying to you? Is the meaning explicit or implicit? Does it have more than one meaning? If so, can you describe the multiple meanings?" Once the storyteller is clear about the meaning they want to convey with their visuals, we help them decide how they will find or create these images, and how they will use them. We ask: "Do you already have these images or will you need to find or create them? How could you use the images that you already have to convey your meaning?"

In her first digital storytelling workshop, designer and filmmaker Lina Hoshino decided to tell her mother's story about the evolution of her name into Chinese and Japanese as a result of the Japanese Occupation and then the Chinese Civil War in Taiwan. At one point in her digital story, Lina shows the Nationalist Party leader, Chiang Kai-shek, in a series of images as she discusses the history. But rather than simply showing the entire formal portrait that she found in the public domain (as part of the F.D. Roosevelt Library), she chose to present the image as a series of crops and a pan.

The original image that she found (Figure 5.1) shows the stately dictator seated with a sword in one hand and a prominently placed medal on his uniform. Lina dissects the full portrait into three cropped details that feature the medal (Figure 5.2), the resting fist (Figure 5.3), and the other hand holding the decorated hilt of the sword (Figure 5.4). After these three images, she then shows the portrait at shoulder height (Figure 5.5) and then slowly pans in and slightly to the left ending on the final frame (Figure 5.6).

Compositionally, the shots move from the medal in the left third, to the fist in the center, to the hilt/hand in the right third. The next shot, the cropped portrait of Chiang, remains in the right third of the frame. Dynamic motion across the frame is created with these detailed stills. In contrast, the slow pan returns our eyes towards the left side of the frame as we are carried along the gaze of the subject. Chiang's Kuomintang army came to Lina's mother's home island of Taiwan with imperial intent. Lina amplifies this through her cropping of the image to the focus on the visual representations of power – details of the medal, gloved fist, martial hilt, and gaze of the leader.

When thinking about creating a digital story, many storytellers who are new to the form will simply envision an image that mirrors each of the different points throughout their entire narrative. These types of literal or direct images that are

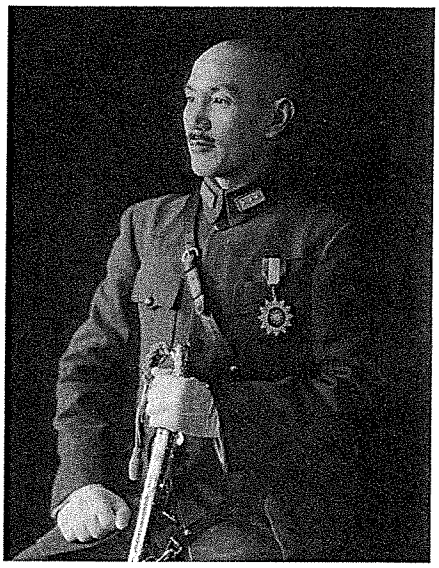

Figure 5.1

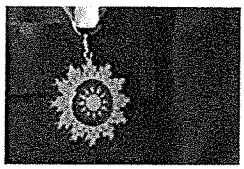

Figure 5.2

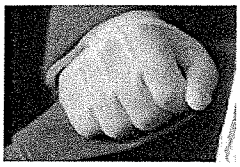

Figure 5.3

Figure 5.4

Figure 5.5

Figure 5.6

used to illustrate a story are called explicit imagery. Explicit imagery is useful for conveying the necessary details of your story or helping to set the scene for your audience. For example, when a storyteller says, "This is the house where I grew up" and shows a photo of a house, the audience understands that this is literally "the house." By intentionally choosing to show the house, the storyteller is also letting us know that it is important for us to see this house in order to understand the details of their story. When considering which images to use and how to use them, we want to help storytellers be clear about the important details that would not be understood or appreciated without the use of explicit imagery. To do this, we ask: "Would the audience be able to understand the story's meaning without this image?"

However, not all aspects of a story's meaning are best conveyed through the use of explicit imagery. When considering an image, a storyteller can ask: "Is this image conveying another layer of meaning?" If so, then the image has an implicit use. Implicit imagery is useful for implying or representing another meaning beyond an image's explicit or literal meaning. Two common techniques for a storyteller to convey their meaning through the use of implicit imagery are visual metaphor and juxtaposition.

When calling images to mind from the moment of change in their story, a storyteller may select an aspect of the scene that stands out for them, but is not an explicit illustration of the event. For example, when sharing a story about losing a childhood home and describing the moment of change, a storyteller may find that a nearby tree, rather than the house itself, is the dominant image they call to mind. As they consider the significance of the tree in their story, they may discover that it represents the idea of stability in their life. The use of an image of a tree to convey stability in their story is a visual metaphor.

The images you choose and the way you combine them will work to create additional layers of meaning. The placement of one image followed by another to create a new layer of meaning is called juxtaposition. An image of a house followed by an image of cardboard boxes, for example, conveys moving. However, until we

know more of the story, we may not know if the message is really about loss, freedom, or maybe both. If the next image is an open road, this could represent freedom. Audiences "read" the juxtaposition of visual images as having implicit meaning that goes beyond what one of the other images explicitly means on its own.

A limitation of material can spark creativity. A storyteller may not possess photos from the major scenes in his or her life. Most people have pictures of their weddings, but who has pictures of their divorce proceedings? Storytellers in our workshops may have only a few photos to work with, or none at all. But paying attention to the images that come to mind when initially sharing the story will help lead the way in creating a visual narrative. And although production time of new material is limited in our workshops, if storytellers are clear about what they want to create, then taking pictures, shooting short segments of video footage, or drawing and scanning images are all good options.

The length of our workshops is typically limited to about three to five days. This constraint on time can help the creative process, but it can also lead to choices about images that are less often considered than the words they accompany. For example, composing a visual narrative with images grabbed from an Internet search can be a quick solution, but oftentimes these images can take away from the integrity of the story. But more importantly, if storytellers have not allowed time early on to see how their images can do some of the heavy lifting of storytelling, they may find they would have altered their script to work with the images they ultimately use.

Well-chosen images act as mediators between the narrative and the audience. As stated in earlier discussions, audiences enjoy stories that lead them to a metaphorical river of meaning and require them to "jump in" in order to make their own connections. Images can grab the hands of the audience and show them the river's immensity. And images have the power to reveal something to the audience that words just can't say.

Step 5: Hearing Your Story

We've just looked at how visuals help bring a story to life. Now, let's look at sound. The recorded voice of the storyteller telling their story is what makes what we call a "digital story" a digital story – not a music video or narrated slideshow. By this point in the process, the emotional tone of the story has been identified, and sound is one of the best ways to convey that tone – through the way the voice-over is performed, the words that are spoken, and the ambient sound and music that work with the narrative. When considering the use of sound, we help storytellers by asking: "Beyond the recorded voiceover, would the story and the scenes within it be enhanced by the use of additional layers of sound? Would the use of ambient sound or music highlight the turning point in your story?"

In digital stories, voice not only tells a vital narrative but it also captures the essence of the narrator, their unique character, and their connection to the lived experience. One's voice is a truly great gift as it is a testament to one's fragility and strength. But why does voice matter so much? In a speech, for example, we are listening for an applause line. In a lecture, we are listening for the major points,

or an outline of information. But in a story, we are listening for the shape of an organic, rhythmic quality that allows us to drift into reverie. Here we have a complex interaction between following the story and allowing the associative memories the story conjures up to flow around us. If an image acts as the hand that leads us into the river, the voice is the riverbed below our feet.

When writing a voice-over, it is important to remember that the piece, in its final form, will move from being words on the page to being spoken aloud. And unlike a speech or spoken-word performance, this spoken narration will exist within a digital story complete with accompanying images and possibly other layers of sound. Because of this film-like format, storytellers want to pay special attention to their choice of words and phrasing and the impact they will have. Less is often more, both in descriptive detail, and in the formality of language. This form is served well by the storyteller mimicking how they speak when they tell a story to a friend, unscripted and unrehearsed, for the first time after having just experienced it.

They use incomplete or broken sentences, interrupted thoughts, and a haunting precision of choice words that make the details come alive for both the teller and listener. The more the spoken voice is inserted into the written script, the more the qualities of a person will come across and pull the audience into the story.

Digital stories that have the recorded voice as the only audio track can be tremendously powerful at conveying tone and meaning. When considering whether or not to add layers of sound, we help storytellers approach the process by starting with as little additional sound as possible and then ask: "Is this enhancing the story, or taking away from it?" If it is enhancing the story, then add a little more and ask the question again. One way to add some sound is to think about the ambient sounds that come up when recalling the moment of change in the story. When we listen to the scenes in our stories, they may include sounds that exist in the background of everyday life – traffic, birds, airplanes, voices, for example. These types of sounds help create a sense of place for the audience. There is no question that ambient sound can add complexity to a story. They help to set the scene and feeling, and its addition helps the audience better understand the significance of a scene, especially if there is a dominant sound that best captures its essence. When creating these ambient sounds, it may be simplest to record them from the available sounds nearby rather than search for pre-existing recordings. Also, the use of your recorded voice or that of another person to create additional layers of ambient sound can be very powerful, yet very simple.

As with ambient sound, storytellers can consider how the minimal use of music can enhance a story by giving it rhythm and character. From an early age we become aware that music can alter our perception of visual information. We see how music in a film stirs up an emotional response very different from what the visual information inherently suggests. By trying out different pieces of music you can change not only the story's tone, but also its meaning and direction. The use of instrumental music, whatever the genre, can enhance the style and meaning of the story's text and visual narratives without competing with the voiceover. While popular lyrical music may work, mistakes are sometimes made in mixing the story of the song and the voiceover in a way that gives an unintended conflict of meaning. However, by intentionally juxtaposing the messages, you may create another layer of meaning that adds depth and complexity to your story.

In our experience, storytellers have an intuitive sense of the music that is appropriate for a digital story. People walk around with songs playing in their heads which can set the mood of one's day, change the way we perceive spaces and places, and establish a rhythm for our steps.

A Note on Copyright

Your writing, recorded voice, and personal images belong to you. When you consider using others' music, you cross into the territory of deciding what should be the appropriate fair use of the copyrighted material. Put simply, whatever the music choice, honor it by providing a credit at the end of the piece. If you are going to make money directly or indirectly by the presentation or distribution of the piece you have created, then you should have the artist's permission to use the music. Fortunately there are a growing number of legal online music collections that provide free and affordable media, as well as software to assist you in designing a soundtrack that is wholly yours.

Step 6: Assembling Your Story

At this point in the process you have found and clarified what your story is about and how it sits with you today. You have also established the overall tone you want to convey. You've identified a moment of change and begun making choices about how to use visuals and sound to bring the story and scenes to life for your audience. Now you are ready to assemble your story by spreading out your notes and images and composing your script and storyboard. This requires answering two questions: How are you structuring the story? And, within that structure, how are the layers of visual and audio narratives working together? But those aren't simple questions. Where do you start? Let's look at the question of structure. You've identified the moment of change, but at what point in the story will it appear? Is it at the beginning, middle, end, or is it divided up at different points throughout the story? Or is it the entire story? What other details or scenes are necessary to provide context for the moment of change? And in what order will the information be sequenced?

When we tell stories for the first time after we have just experienced an event, we may want to launch right in, but if we see a confused or disinterested look on our listener's face then we should know to stop and say, "Wait, let me back up. In order to appreciate what I'm telling you, you have to know this ..." In essence, we understand that the listener is lacking some important information in order to "get it," and so we choose to provide our audience with a back story, or exposition. In going back to fill in details for our audience, depending how well they know us and know our life's ongoing narrative, we may find ourselves believing that we need to tell them everything, but quickly realize that this is impossible. A complete telling of every bit of detail is never really "complete," and in the process we begin editing, choosing which details we feel are the most necessary to include in order to construct meaning. In this real-time editing process, we are absorbing our listener's experience

and making many choices about where their interest is peaked, where they seem lost, and where they are with us on the journey.

This process of telling stories and reading the audience's reaction is critical to understanding story structure. It helps answer the questions: What are the necessary parts of my story? How will telling this part shape the story differently or take it in a different direction? Knowing which pieces of information are necessary to include allows us to then determine the best way to order those pieces and keep our audience engaged. As the storyteller, we know where the treasure (insight) is hidden, and we are giving our audience clues to find it.

The joy of storytelling comes in determining how much to tell them and at what point. As our narrative literacy progresses from the comprehension of nursery rhymes towards a more intricate understanding of complex narratives, we desire more subtlety in a story's form. As the audience, we are less likely to look for intended morals and spelled-out meanings, and will instead draw from it what we find important. But presenting the conflicts, problems, or unanswered questions with subtlety requires not only identifying the right conflict but the right amount of conflict.

Daniel Weinshenker describes building tension in a story's structure by using a cat analogy: When you are playing with a cat and holding a string for it to chase, if you make it too simple, it will get offended, or bored, and likely walk away. If you make it too difficult and never let it catch the string, then it will give up. But the joy in the game is finding the balance between making it just hard enough to challenge the cat, keeping him engaged in trying to catch the string, and letting him savor it when he does.

In other words, don't give away too much information all at once. Allow your audience to enjoy the challenge. And rather than establishing a chronological telling of events with the moment of change positioned as the story's climax, you might instead try moving the moment of change to the beginning with little or no context, which may leave the moment hanging to pique the interest of the audience, and then go back and fill in more and more details and scenes and allow the audience to piece together the meaning and resolution. However, to do this you need to pay special attention to your audience's experience. For example, if you begin the story with something provocative and don't reveal the piece that explains it until the end, you may need to remind the audience about the question in the first place so they can savor the ending.

Once the basic structure of the story is outlined, the next step is scripting and storyboarding, or in other words, laying out how the visual and audio narratives will complement each other over the duration of the piece to best tell the story. The most common approach that storytellers take to planning their story in our workshops is to write notes in the margins of their script in order to reference where certain images or sounds will occur. In the Chapter 8 we discuss storyboarding in detail, and provide a sample template that includes a series of tracks that you can fill in with notes about the visuals and their effects, voice-over and sound. As you determine how your visual and audio narratives are working together within each of these layers, ask yourself: Do I want them to be redundant, complementary, juxtaposing, or disjunctive?

Considering the above question will not only help you determine how the various layers contribute to the story, but it will also help you economize each in relationship to one another. You can ask yourself: If I have an image that conveys my meaning better than words can, how can I use my words to tell another aspect

of the scene? In digital stories, the way we combine the layers to convey meaning allows us to economize the presentation of information and lets our audience make the connections. For example, if we hear a phone ring and the storyteller says, "I held my breath as I got the news ..." and we see a photo of a loved one fade to black, we may understand that the storyteller is conveying a sense of loss. This process of the audience understanding bits and pieces of information as a single idea is called "closure." And as we edit down our scripts and choose each of our images, we need to think about how we set up opportunities for the audience to provide closure with each layer of the story independently, as well as in relation to each other. Oftentimes, this means your script requires fewer words. In an effort to help our storytellers, we provide formal constraints in the production of their digital stories: A word count of 250–375, and fewer than twenty images or video segments. This type of creative limitation helps the storyteller figure out what's most important in his or her story, while also helping to organize their time in the production process.

Digital stories contain multiple visual and audio layers.
The visual layers are:

- The composition of a single image
- The combination of multiple images within a single frame, either through collage or fading over time
- The juxtaposition of a series of images over time
- Movement applied to a single image, either by panning or zooming or the juxtaposition of a series of cropped details from the whole image
- The use of text on screen in relation to visuals, spoken narration, or sound.

The audio layers are:

- Recorded voice-over
- Recorded voice-over in relation to sound, either music or ambient sound
- Music alone or in contrast to another piece of music.

After your story edits are assembled, pacing is one of the final considerations in creating a digital story because it requires an assessment of how all the layers of information are working over the entire length of the piece. When pacing your story, ask yourself: How does the pacing contribute to the story's meaning? How would pace, or rhythm, bring emphasis to the moment of change?

A story's rhythm conveys an added layer of meaning. A fast pace with quick edits and upbeat music can convey urgency. A slow pace with gradual transitions and extended shots may convey calmness. A mechanically paced story may work nicely for a piece about the monotony of an assembly line job, but for an adventure story it will flatten the experience of the joys and hardships that the audience is expecting to savor. Adjusting the pace of your story provides an opportunity for the audience to listen more clearly. Stories can move along at an even pace, stop to take a deep

breath, and then proceed. Creating space for silence, for example, provides the audience with time for all layers of the story to be absorbed. Even if you think your story is paced too slowly, chances are your audience will appreciate more time than you think to allow their minds to explore the thoughts and emotions that are being stirred within them.

The assemblage of your story takes time, and isn't easy. However, our best advice is to keep it simple.

Step 7: Sharing Your Story

At this point in the process, the layers of the story have been assembled. Finding and clarifying the insight, and creating the digital story have taken the storyteller on a journey of self-understanding. The story and the insight it conveys may have evolved throughout the process. Therefore, it is important to take time now to revisit the context in which the story was initially described in order to determine the relevant information to include when the story is being shared. To help storytellers do this, we ask: "Who is your audience? What was your purpose in creating the story? Has the purpose shifted during the process of creating the piece? In what presentation will your digital story be viewed? And what life will the story have after it's completed?"

Before the final version is exported, consider the audience once more, but this time in terms of how you will present the digital story. You may be planning to show it to one individual, one time, for a specific reason. Or you may be planning to share it online with as many people as possible. But for most storytellers their plans fall somewhere in between, or they may not yet know the full extent that they will eventually share their story. But in any event, it's important to consider the contextualizing information you want to convey to your audience, both as part of the digital story and alongside it.

During our workshops we ask if storytellers want to say anything before their story is screened. Some say, "No, I'll let the story speak for itself," and others tell a bit more in order to set it up. When we share stories on our own website we provide a short description of the story and the storyteller's responses to a few questions: Tell us a little about yourself. Why did you choose this story to tell? How have you changed as a result of telling this story?

Knowing more about the story, the storyteller, or both, can reveal a new depth of appreciation by the audience. For example, the First Interlude of this book features Monte Hallis' *Tanya*, a story about how Monte discovers the meaning of friendship through knowing Tanya during her fight with AIDS. The back story she provided in person before her story was screened at the workshop was that Tanya had passed away. The story around a piece changes and expands over time.

Considering your audience at this point in the production process may alter how you complete the final edits. If you know who the audience will be for your piece and what they know about you, then it will help determine how much context you decide to provide about the story. Contextualizing information can be either within or outside of the story's script. If your intended audience already knows certain details about you and your story, then it will help determine which details you

include in your script, and which details can instead be revealed through outside contextualizing information. You may choose to contextualize the story outside of the script, but still within the actual piece, by providing a title screen at the beginning and text screens at either the beginning or end that display additional information. This is a common technique used in films in order to set up a story, or communicate what happened to a character or situation thereafter.

Being clear about your purpose in creating the story and how it may have shifted during the process of creating the piece will help you determine how you present and share your story. In our programmatic custom workshops, sometimes the storytellers are recruited with the understanding that their stories will address a certain topic and be presented in a specific context. For example, in a project with foster youth, their host organization may ask if they would like to participate in a workshop in which they tell a personal story about their idea of the "permanency" of family, and have their story be included in a training program for social workers. The storytellers are informed about the expectation before agreeing to attend the workshop. And within the workshop, they are invited to share their larger life story during the first of two story circles. Then during a second story circle they focus their story in a way that is meaningful and timely to them, and also addresses the specific purpose with which the stories are to be shared. Knowing that their story will have this additional audience and purpose will help them appropriately frame their story. In the interview that follows in this book, Amy Hill discusses the issue of presenting stories within their intended context.

If you know the presentation setting in which your audience will view your digital story, then it will help you determine what kind of contextualizing materials should accompany the piece, and will also provide more time during the digital story to focus on other content in the story. For example, if a storyteller makes a story about the successes of their after-school program with the intention of presenting it on their organization's website, they know that the audience will be able to learn more by exploring the information online, and therefore won't need be concerned with including it in the digital story.

Whether your piece will be integrated into a live or published presentation, or is but one in a series of related digital stories that you create, or one that acts as a prompt to elicit others' stories, it is wise to prepare in advance by thinking through all of the possibilities as your story goes forth to live its life.

Finally

The storytelling process is a journey. And in our workshops, we approach this journey as a facilitated group process. We believe that the connections made between people in the story circle help to focus and inspire each individual throughout the process. For many of the storytellers we help, the digital story they create in our workshops may be the only digital story they ever make, in part because overcoming the challenge of finding and clarifying the insights and emotions in their story is not easily done alone. Therefore, we recommend that digital storytellers connect with others to share ideas and work through these steps together.