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Approaches to the Scripting Process

Prompts and Processes

After all these years of people bringing their stories to StoryCenter, I would like to think the scripting process gets easier. But it doesn't. Writing for many is a painful process, and moving from the big idea of the story to the little script of a narrative is even more excruciating. To take some of the pain away, we want to treat the process of getting the words down on the page as a completely different subject.

In the preceding chapters we discussed the insights and structure for your story, how to work through a group process to hone in on a story idea, as well as the considerations for working with multiple forms of media. In this chapter we will discuss how to find your best creative voice for self-expression in writing, about how writing happens, and about what makes the way you write unique and powerful.

As with our approach to digital storytelling in general, we find that our practice is ideally suited to group settings. And, while you can use these ideas to get started on your own, success happens just as often by comparing your work to others, and by hearing a variety of examples. So find a few friends, declare yourself a writer's group, gather once a week for a month, and share your writing. Your digital story will thank you for your efforts.

Our Friend, the 4 × 6 Index Card

Of all the suggestions that we have made in helping people to prepare their writing, the use of 4 × 6 index cards has garnered the most praise.

The idea is simple: novice and experienced writers alike inevitably suffer from a malady aptly called "blank page syndrome." The weight of filling a blank page, or more than likely, many pages, can easily crush our creative initiative, and as a result cause some difficulty in getting started. In our workshops, when we find a person blankly staring at their monitors with a deer-in-the-headlights look in their eyes, we like to hand them a 4 × 6 index card and say, "You have six minutes and only the space on the front and back of this card to create a draft of your story. Write whatever comes out and don't stop until either the time or the card runs out." We might also give them a prompt: "This is a postcard. Choose a person that you think this story is for and write them a postcard about the story. Start with 'Dear'."

The card is small, and it is finite. It seems possible and perhaps even easy to fill. So for the novice, we are saying, "Just get this much down, and we'll work from there." And for writers confident in their ability to write countless pages of prose, this exercise is a creative challenge. To them, we say, "We know you could write a novel, now just try and say it in only this much space."

One of my favorite Mark Twain quotes is from a letter that he wrote to a friend: "Forgive me, this is a long letter. I would have written you a short letter, but I didn't have the time."

Shorter isn't always easier for the mature writer. The 4 × 6 card also helps condense the narrative by breaking the story down to its most basic elements and forcing a writer to ask, "What are my choices in the beginning? How quickly must I get into the action of the narrative?" Usually, this approach means sacrificing the long exposition that accompanies the first draft of a story. But in the end, if the writing is no longer than the front and back of a 4 × 6 card, or one double-spaced, typewritten page, it ensures that the writing will lead to a two- to three-minute story complete with narration.

Writing Exercises

In a group process, we are proponents of writing exercises. While we are fully aware of the potential and beauty of free writing, it's important to have a class spend ten to twenty minutes writing down whatever comes to their mind. I have found that the shared themes and ideas of a prompted idea can connect people to each other in wonderful ways.

This is my favorite prompt:

> In our lives there are moments, decisive moments, when the direction of our lives was pointed in a given direction, and because of the events of this moment, we are going in another direction. Poet Robert Frost shared this concept simply as "The Road Not Taken." The date of a major achievement, the time there was a particularly bad setback, the experiences of meeting a special person, the birth of a child, the end of a relationship, or the death of a loved one are all examples of these fork-in-the-road experiences. Right now, at this second, write about a decisive moment in your life. You have eight minutes.

The writing that comes from this prompt, when it comes unannounced at the beginning of a workshop, often goes straight to the emotional core of the author's life. The act of sharing of these kinds of stories can be instantly bonding for a group.

If the goal of the exercise is to prompt distant memories, we have not found a better approach than writing instructor Bill Roorbach's idea of having participants in the workshop first draw a map of the neighborhood where they grew up. Reaching back in one's memory to locate the layout of the streets, where friends lived, the names of friendly or strange neighbors, the way to the store, or the secret paths to school, inevitably opens up an infinite number of possible stories. The physicalization of

a memory, trying to remember a time by remembering the places of that time, the places you traveled through on a daily basis, a neighborhood, a house, or a room, usually leads quickly to events that are rich with the kinds of meaningful inspections that make good stories.

There are innumerable prompts that might work for various situations. Sometimes these may have nothing to do with the subject initially being explored. Simply jumping into writing on some subject can unlock the mind. Even if the writing is not further explored, the process may lead people back to their chosen story with new perspective.

Here is a short list of some themes for which prompts could also be built for powerful stories. Books about writing are filled with these exercises, so don't forget to pick up a few when it's time to delve deeper into your interest in writing beyond the digital storytelling experience:

- Write to a mentor or hero in your life to say thank you.
- Tell the story of a time when "it just didn't work" – a point, at your job or at some other event or activity, when you would've been typically competent or successful, and how that all changed when everything fell apart before your eyes.
- Describe a time when you felt really scared.
- Tell the story of a "first" – first kiss, first day on a job, first time trying something really difficult, the first time you heard a favorite song, etc.
- Tell something about the stuff in your life and what it reveals about you – a favorite appliance, a toy from childhood, a keepsake, clothing, or furniture . . .
- Tell a story about the body: a scar or injury, a family trait, your grandma's hands?
- Make a list of things you absolutely cannot stand, and things you feel you cannot live without; choose one from each column and make a story that connects them.
- And of course, the old standby: Tell me about a time when you were embarrassed.

These Stories From These Pictures

Digital stories often start with the pictures. Our easiest direction to anyone thinking about making a digital story is to look around his or her house and find images that provoke memories and stories that are meaningful. Then, see if there are other images around the house that are part of that story. And, in the end, you will try to connect the memories that link all of these images together.

As we talk about storyboarding and structure, the notion of illustrating the script, or accentuating the writing with images, is emphasized as an outgrowth of a successful draft of the narrative. However, some people who come to the workshop have taken the absolutely opposite approach to the process. They will pull out the photos for their story, arrange them on a table, and sort them out in order from beginning to end. Then, with the story visually organized, they start writing. Is this approach effective? Of course it can be – great stories have emerged through this process.

Getting Into the Scene

We spoke about "finding the moment" in Chapter 5, but it is worth re-visiting this idea in more detail here, as we think this is a key component to successful storytelling. When authors come to our digital storytelling workshops, we have them share first drafts and talk about their ideas for their stories. Oftentimes, I find myself discussing the notion of scene with the authors. As an example, I can take one approach to my own story about my father's death:

> Well first of all, let me just say, I was seventeen at the time and I had finished high school that summer. My dad had smoked three-packs-a-day, and had been trying to quit smoking for a couple of months. He was sixty-one, and had a difficult life as a union organizer working in Texas and throughout the South. But we had gone on a vacation the month before and he seemed like he was doing okay.
>
> He came down from his bedroom saying that he had a terrible pain.
>
> We called the doctor. The doctor said that it was probably an ulcer attack. He had had several of those. We waited. He got much worse. We decided to rush him to the hospital. It was a heart attack. He died within a half-hour. My mom was hysterical.
>
> It was a night I will always remember.

What we have is a fairly typical set of expository contexts, and a sequence of events that most people use to casually recall a major catastrophe in their lives. This approach is a fairly direct and distanced recitation of the facts, and it usually finishes with a statement that is conclusive. In this example, the recalled memory is understated and obvious to the extreme. If this were a dramatic dialogue, a speech by an actor pretending to be natural, it might work, but it does not convey the experience with clarity and depth.

But here is a description of the same memory that I shared at my mother's memorial in 2001, twenty-seven years after my father died:

> I will never forget the sound of my mom's voice when the doctor said, "George is dead."
>
> "God No! No! No!"
>
> A scream. A release. An explosion.
>
> The sound of her wail bounced off all the walls of the emergency room at Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas, bounced down the streets and through the trees, bounced out into the night sky, all the way across the universe of my young mind.
>
> In a single moment, a single pronouncement, everything changed for my mom. It divided her life in two, and it taught me that love can reach down into the cellular essence of awareness, and with its rupture, tear a human being in half.

What differentiates these two texts for me is the fact that, in the second text, I am asking my audience to immediately journey in time with me to the exact instant

when it all really happened. No context, other than the assumption that "George" must be someone really important, and the feelings, best as I remembered them, that accompanied the defining moment of the experience; my mom's reaction to the doctor's words. And finally, with over twenty-five years of perspective, what that means to me now.

In the above example, I tried to take the audience into the scene at the hospital. I could have described the way it looked and smelled, where we were standing moments before the doctor came up, and what happened afterwards, but all of that was assumed when I said it was the moment that my father was pronounced dead. Instead, it serviced the quality of the writing to strip away all of the descriptive material. We have found that audiences really can build an elaborate understanding of the story if they can get a sense of the context of an event. Furthermore, we know that much of what seems like important background, or exposition, is in fact superfluous to what really happened and what it really felt like to be there.

Taking the audience to the moment of an important scene, one that either initiates or concludes your tale, and putting them in your shoes, is why we listen to the story. We want to know how characters react. We want to imagine ourselves there as participants or witnesses, and we want to know what someone else takes away from the experience and uses to lead their own lives forward.

This idea of scene is related but separate from the terms of the specific disciplines of literature, theater, and film. Dramatic scenes all have complex sets of conventions that allow us to observe the action of characters within a continuous time of the narrative. In our thinking about scene, we want to encourage people to share at least one portion of their narrative as a scene – to write as if they were there, inside the events as they unfolded, experiencing the shock, surprise, or amusement, for example, for the first time. For many stories, this strips away the superficial consideration of the events, and gets to the heart of the matter.

Character Studies and Personal Story

We know that most parents are multi-faceted, complex humans. In one story, it may serve to have the parent in the classic role of the ideal mentor, thereby filling one stereotype of parenthood. In another story, the parent may be a beast, or display beastly behavior, but if we are mature enough, and we are given one small nugget of context – for example, "When they got drunk, they would be mean" – it is sufficient for us to imagine that they had good days as well. We are probably aware that the story is a cautionary tale about human behavior, not the evidence to indict the guilty party.

Lajos Egri, author of the bible for my training in dramatic theory, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, reduced all great storytelling and theater to the author's understanding of the true nature of the characters he invents in the world of his narrative. Like most people, when I watch a film or a play, I know when character development has been rendered ineffective when I am able to say to myself, "You know, that character would have never said those words, or behaved in that way."

In any story, the characters' strengths and flaws drive the series of events forward, leading logically to the climactic clash or coming together that delivers the conclusion of the story.

When we write in the first person about real events and real people, we make the same choices as the fictional author; that is, we describe those details of the character that are pertinent to the story. It is nothing short of egomaniacal to imagine that our characters are faithful portraits of actual people. In our digital stories, they are not even sketches, but rather more like cartoons or contour drawings – brief and subtle outlines that highlight their most compelling and relevant qualities.

Some of the writers who have participated in our workshops are fixated on elaborating their characters. They fear providing too simplistic a picture of the people they are describing, or their behavior in a given context, so they expand the narrative with a multiplicity of facets in order to feel more "fair." Personal storytellers are not judges or juries, they are faulty witnesses. And as faulty witnesses, we seek truth inside and around the simple lines of the sketch of their memories. We, the audience, are only capable of judging the approach they take to establishing the narrative, and whether or not their attitude and tone reflect balanced judgment or unreasonable accusation.

By letting the story dictate the degree to which we know the background of the character, we avoid cluttering some of the prose with assessments that cancel each other out. We can communicate which characteristic, for the purpose of the story, we can paint with the broad brush of a stereotype sufficient for our small tale so the audience can fill in the character with the complexities of their own experiences.

Interviewing

What if writing is not an option? From the beginning, StoryCenter has found itself in environments or work with specific individuals where for reasons of literacy, language difference between instructors and participants, expedition of process, or the simplification of engagement with the storyteller, we work to the script through an interview process. In attempting to stay true to our ethical precepts, we still work to make the storyteller responsible for the edit, and we have developed a number of techniques to manage the process so our storytellers feel like their words are shaped by themselves, even if writing is never involved.

These techniques include recording the interview and then editing it side-by-side with the storytellers, as well as transcribing the story in interview format, reviewing the edit with the storyteller, and then re-feeding the original lines to the storyteller for their recording, sentence by sentence. If done well, we cannot distinguish between these efforts and written pieces as texts (other than these pieces many times sound more natural).

At the same time, we do refer to traditions of media journalism and documentary to inform our process, particularly how we might shape the interviews and the interview process.

Interviewing Techniques

Guidelines for the Interviewer

1 Study the questions so that you are not reading from the page, and feel free to ad lib. Being able to sustain eye contact assists the interviewee in relaxing and responding in a natural way.
2 Allow the interviewee to complete his or her thoughts. Unlike a radio or TV interviewer who may be concerned with "dead air" in the conversation, give the interviewee all the time desired to think through and restate something that is a bit difficult to articulate. Interruptions can cause people to lose their train of thought or become self-aware and steer away from important but perhaps emotionally difficult information. Let the interviewee tell you when he or she has finished a question before moving on to the next.
3 When appropriate, use your own intuition when asking questions to get more detailed responses. Often, a person's initial thoughts about a question only retrieve a broad outline of a memory. Feel free to request specifics or details that would clarify or expand upon a general response.
4 If the story is about information that is specifically painful or traumatic in the person's life, carefully assess how far you will allow the respondent to delve into these memories. In many situations where the interviewer is not a spouse or a loved one, you may cross into territory that is much better approached in a therapeutic environment with experienced guides or professionally trained advisors. We have come perilously close in interviews to taking people into an emotional state from which they cannot return at the session. This is embarrassing for the respondent, and an emotionally inconsiderate act on the part of the interviewer, as the interviewee may not have the therapeutic support to cope with these issues in the hours and days after the interview. Don't feel you need to hunt for emotionally charged material to make the interview effective. If it comes naturally and comfortably, so be it.
5 Finally, along with ensuring privacy in the interview, make sure everyone is comfortable: comfortable chairs, water at hand, and the microphone positioned so as not to disrupt ease of movement (a lavalier, or pin-on microphone, is the best).

Fragments of Understanding

When you are stuck, really stuck, as a storyteller working on a script, often as not it means you are still in the story. The story cannot write itself because what it represents for you in the moment, the story's insight, is emerging, but perspective is still months or years away. In our workshops, we suggest that certain writers forget all the advice about "insight," "moments," and the circle of storytelling, and just write a poem. Fragments. Thoughts. Juxtaposed.

Perhaps the distinction between the reflective writing style emerging from our workshop environments and poetry is overstated. The purposed and immersive

quality of story, as we understand it, is often derailed by people's relationship to the subject. The stories are inherently fractured, inconclusive, and confusing. So perhaps the writing, in an attempt at authenticity, should be the same.

Or put another way:

Never kneel to one
Notion of narrative
The needs of the narrator
Exceed those of the form
Excellent examples
Of enduring expression
Exist in abundance
And create their own norm.

Finally, a Few Words on Style

During my high school and early college days as a young journalist, I carried around a copy of *Elements of Style*, the William Strunk and E. B. White companion for all writers. I have to be frank: except for their call for economy, economy, economy, not much stuck in my sense of the rules of good style. In other words, I am the last person to teach anyone about formal issues of style. Having said that, Strunk and White might have been apoplectic at much of what I love in the styles of the writing of our students. What works, particularly as the words leave the page and are spoken by the authors, is not a case study in language usage according to conventions of grammar and syntax defended by the gatekeepers of Standard Written English – or any other language.

What works is truth. By this, I mean that an author's truth about how he or she conceives of a personal way of storytelling is their style. How does truth happen in storytelling? Here is where the metaphor of journey, or quest, serves me best. Good writing has a destination and seeks the shortest path to the destination, but no shorter. The destination is usually the punchline, the pay-off, or the point of the story. Detours should never be accidental, unconscious, or indulgent. Each word and each apparent digression is critical to the final resolution of the character's action.

I am a traditionalist in this idea, having never fallen for what feels to me to be an experimental conceit of an "anything goes" approach to narrative.

But that is my truth. I have had the pleasure of hearing thousands of people share their stories, and each with their own style of telling. In that sense, I accept that when it works, it works.

The good news about those of us living at the beginning of the twenty-first century is that we have an awareness regarding how we tell our stories, and how telling has much less impact than how we are heard. Stories do a number of things to people, but only a small part of what they do involves the story's content and our stylistic intentions. When people hear a story, what is occurring in their lives at that moment that either focuses or distracts their attention? What is the context

in which the story is being heard? What is the ambience of the environment? And who else is in the audience? Context changes everything about the impact of a story on the listener.

So trust your own voice – the way it feels right to you to put things, and your own approach to these stories. And make sure that when it comes time to share your story, you are certain that the context best suited to your story is being appreciated to its fullest.

The Author's Reflections on First-Person Narrative

Critics of our work suggest that our emphasis on first-person perspective cannot allow for hybrid forms of narrative that include combining storytelling with persuasion, argumentation, analysis, and dispassionate reflection. We readily concede that our work is a reaction to the swing of the communication pendulum over the last two centuries from sentiment to objectivity.

The Industrial Revolution established a model for breaking information down to little nuggets of data. That dissolution process, like many industrial processes, provides the constituent elements, but leaves out the soul of things: a tomato can be made in a lab, but who wants to eat it when offered a homegrown garden tomato instead? This process can be extended to writing in that we often analyze with dispassionate authority, but we miss the essence. Our heads become too separated from our hearts.

In the social and natural sciences, objective observation and neutral communication have proven impossible – we change the thing observed by observing it. We carry the ideological and subconscious fetish of objectivity in all our thinking. A researcher or journalist can certainly synthesize, but the participant in the experience retains a privileged vantage point, and, as audience, we want their narratives as unfiltered as possible, so that we can work through assessments from multiple perspectives.

From the very beginning we have believed in framing all narratives in the first person. This was simply more honest. Our unique perspective on experience is all we have, but it is just that. Our stories are not a doorway to truth, but they are one portal where light can fall through. And the more light, the better.