

Story Telling with Intent

The Sustainability Story That Makes
Your Point Wins

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What is a Story?



Booklet inspired by McNeilly & Stoll (2014)

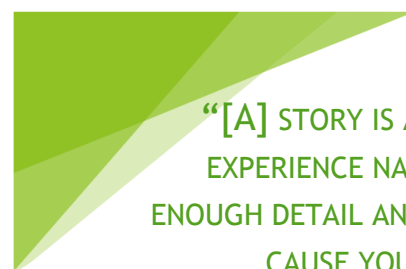
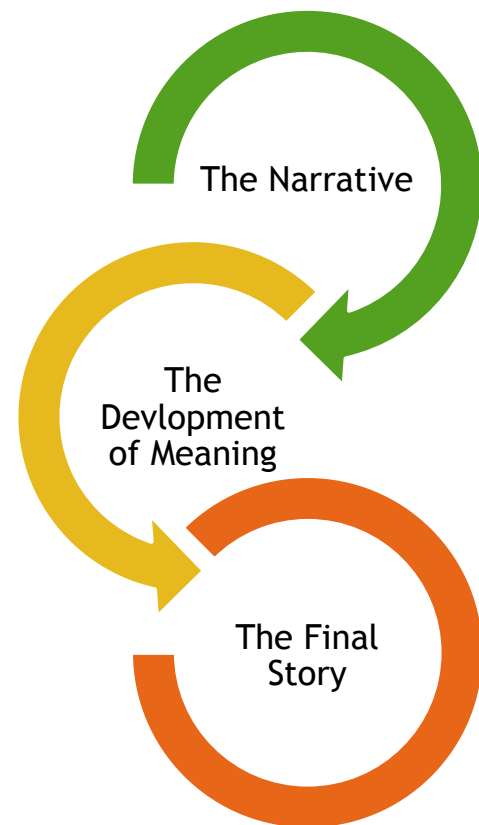
People tell stories everyday - whether it is in a professional environment, or talking to their friends and loved ones. It is an art which is a necessity. But how precisely can you define what a story is?

In its simplest sense, a story can be anything that is told or recounted by one speaker to another (Denning, 2009). Indeed, Mark Twain is known to have simply commented “...that a tale shall accomplish something and arrive somewhere.” (Twain, 1994)

But notably, Denning points out that a story generally is more than ‘A happened to B,’ but rather the development of meaning within the plot. ‘What happened’ is simply narrative, whilst the actual changes to characters that occur throughout the journey are what create the story (Martin, 2011).

Rayfield (2009) expanded beyond this idea though, as he states that a story also requires the structure to have a certain minimal and maximal degree of complexity and to be of a certain ‘kind.’ Under an experiment, listeners responded to structure rather than content when asked to identify what was and was not a story, even when the stories he were presented were non-sensical, but had the correct structure.

Stories in the past allowed us to make sense of a rapidly changing world, whilst also providing a method to learn valuable lessons. Today, the definition of a story remains much the same, with a narrative being transformed into a story, if the story serves some over-arching purpose, and therefore develops meaning.



“[A] STORY IS A REIMAGINED
EXPERIENCE NARRATED WITH
ENOUGH DETAIL AND FEELING TO
CAUSE YOUR LISTENERS’
IMAGINATIONS TO EXPERIENCE IT AS
WELL.”

Annette Simmons (Simmons, Whoever tells



Why Tell Stories with Intent?

Telling stories with intent has been carried out for eons; whether it was the Roman Centurion telling of his great victory to his comrades to inspire confidence, or the Egyptian Priest telling stories of the afterlife to create devout believers. It is undeniable that stories have always been seen as important - but why?

This ancient art has been used by many great speakers throughout history, and creates many of the most memorable messages (eg: Aesop's Fables which have survived over 2500 years).

A good story has the ability to **motivate and inspire** others. Martin Luther King Jr's Famous "*I have a dream*" speech is a perfect example of this, acting as a rallying cry for many years later. Although famous speeches throughout history have led to such rallying points, they need not be as extreme as this

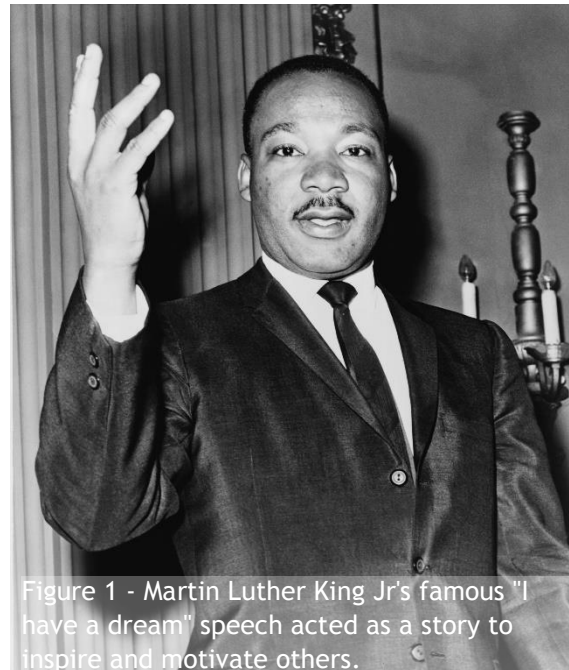


Figure 1 - Martin Luther King Jr's famous "I have a dream" speech acted as a story to inspire and motivate others.

behavior within the audience, or a similar behavioral change.

Metaphors and analogies are common tools in storytelling to help drive a point home, as shown by various religious figureheads in the past, as well as countless others through

"HUMANS HAVE USED STORY
POWER TO REMEMBER,
ENTERTAIN, AND PERSUADE SINCE
WE USED ROCKS AS KNIVES."

Laurie Bennett (Bennett, 2013)

example, as any good story has the ability to drive others to perform better by invoking emotional responses - no matter how small the issue. The story can act to **catch people's attention** too - an entertaining story, a funny story or an emotional story can all cause the audience to become invested in the message the story-teller is making. This is particularly important within the sustainability sector - especially when your intent here is to encourage green



the ages. By breaking the story down into something simpler, it means that it becomes easier to understand the message that is being explained. On top of this, by relating abstract issues to more mundane and common situations, it means that people can more readily apply the messages to their everyday lives. The issues raised allow the storyteller to **teach and educate** the audience through these methods, and inspire new points of view. Metaphors and analogies can be most helpful to explain

some of the data and graphs in sustainability (e.g., use a story to show how much coal is needed to power a lightbulb. [Link](#) until 2:10).

The story can also act as **self-revelation**, explaining who you are to the audience, allowing yourself to be seen in a different light. (See 'Who-Am-I? stories for more information'). Such an act can endear you to an audience, or allow yourself to be framed in a more positive light in a hostile situation.

10 MORE REASONS TO TELL STORIES

In his book (Smith, 2007), Paul Smith notes his 10 reasons to answer the question 'Why Tell Stories?':

- 1. **Storytelling is simple** - and notably can be done by anyone.*
- 2. **Storytelling is timeless** - it has always worked and always will.*
- 3. **Stories are demographic-proof** - ie: any age, race or gender can be affected by the same story.*
- 4. **Stories are contagious.***
- 5. **Stories are easier to remember.***
- 6. **Stories inspire.***
- 7. **Stories appeal to ALL types of learners** - whether visual, auditory or kinesthetic learners.*
- 8. **Stories fit better where most of the learning happens** - in the workplace.*
- 9. **Stories put the listener in a mental learning mode** - as opposed to critical or evaluative modes, where the listener is more likely to reject what is being said.*
- 10. **Telling stories shows respect for the audience** - they give more freedom for the audience to come to their own conclusions.*



The Types of Story

(Inspired by Simmons, 2007)



So you need to tell a story - but how should you tell it? Luckily, stories to be told with intent fall nicely into a few categories which we will explore now! This is not an exhaustive list, but four of the most relevant to sustainability. So let's dive straight in...

The 'Who-am-I? Story

What is it?

A story to explain who you are, and what background you come from. Eg: Why did you become passionate about sustainability?

Why use it?

Explaining who you are can have a multitude of benefits, which vary depending on the type of audience that you are speaking to. A Who-Am-I explanation can be used with groups who support you to increase their confidence in your abilities, or as a way to set up the groundwork before you launch into your points. The gist of the technique is to let the audience know who you really are (or who you want them to think you are), so that they feel familiar with you, and are therefore far more likely to listen to your arguments.

People are naturally inclined to assume that a stranger is untrustworthy. This doesn't mean that they dislike you, simply that they don't know enough about you to trust you yet. A New York Times / CBS published report in July 1999 asked "Of people in general, how many of them do you think are trustworthy?" getting the answer of 30%. They then continued by asking "Of people you know, how many do you think are trustworthy?" This gave the much larger figure of 70%. Simmons (2007) notes that not only is this "statistically impossible," but that it shows the "non-linear dynamics

How Can This Apply to Sustainability?

- How did you become interested in sustainability yourself?
- What projects have you worked on in the past that you consider a success/failure/defining moment in your career?
- Who mentored you to start work in the sustainability sector? What did they do to inspire you?

of trust;" ie: the fact that once people know you, they are more likely to trust you (even if this is entirely irrational).

In the more unusual situation where you are trying to connect with a potentially "hostile" audience, the Who-Am-I story can also allow you to break down the 'us' and 'them.' If people do not know your background, they subconsciously assume the worst (Simmons, 2007), meaning that they assume that you have something to gain by influencing them.

Tips

It does not matter whether it is a biographical story from your life or not, as long as it allows you to reveal part of your personality to the audience (Holland, 2012). It could be about an event or place that reveals your feelings and thoughts.

Example

Photographer Edward Burtynsky explains why he became passionate about the environment - click [here](#).

"THE ESSENCE OF TRUST BUILDING IS TO EMPHASIZE THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN YOU AND THE CUSTOMER."

Thomas J. Watson

The ‘Why-am-I-Here’ Story

What is it?

When presenting to an audience, it is important to gain their trust. The audience is unlikely to respond positively unless they know what you will be ‘getting’ out of the situation. When presenting to a new audience, sometimes it is assumed that anyone trying to convince someone of something will be gaining from the enterprise (Simmons, *Whoever tells the Best Story Wins*, 2007), and therefore that the audience is being duped.

It is important therefore to explain how the scheme benefits you if it does, or if not, why you are driven to spread this idea to others. Once a speaker is seen to be honest, it becomes far easier to accept their ideas and to trust them.



How Can This Apply to Sustainability?

- Why are you interested in sustainability?
 - What do you gain out of encouraging others to be sustainable? Why do you have a selfless goal?
 - May closely link with the ‘Who-Am-I’ story (as in the example below)
 - What benefits would sustainable practices bring to YOUR organization if they were taken up by the target audience?
-

Why use it?

The idea of this type of story is to turn someone’s initial suspicion into trust in you. Allowing such trust means that the person can put their faith into the message you are trying to purvey. Simmons (2006) notes that even a man with selfish goals seems more trustworthy once he explains “Why he is there.”

Tips

Build on truth and authenticity and speak from the heart.

Example

Ron Finley plants vegetable gardens in South Central LA — in abandoned lots, traffic medians, along the curbs. Why? For fun, for defiance, for beauty and to offer some alternative to fast food in a community where “the drive-thrus are killing more people than the drive-bys.” Listen to this talk [here](#).

Think about how this acts as a ‘Why-am-I-Here’ story, and a ‘Who-am-I Story.’ Also note the use of humour to make the story more memorable.



Figure 2 Ron Finley Relies on a Why-Am-I-Here Story to Make His Point ©TED

The Vision Story

What is it?

An ability to share your ideas for the future is vital to any speaker, especially one talking about sustainability, where questions involving the future of the environment around us are asked every day. Therefore, it is important to be able to express your vision to people, and therefore inspire them to try to reach attainable targets.

The previously mentioned “I have a dream” speech is a vision story, where the vision of an equal future is laid out before the audience. However, any speech setting out interim or long term targets shows your vision to the audience, and can be classified as a vision speech.

A vision speech should be free from empirical data however, but rather one that sets the scene for once a target has been reached (Simmons, Vision, 2014).

Figure 3 - Vision stories allow you to explain your targets and aims without empirical data



Why use it?

Interim and final goals and targets always motivate the audience. These goals can be represented by scenarios dreamed up by the speaker to show the end product of their ideas, whether it is a low-litter campus, or a zero net emissions building. The envisaged

goal makes the target seem like a sensible idea and one that is “worth it.” It works because in a sensory level the audience “...go[es] there” (Smith, 2007).

Techniques like this are useful to encourage those who were not necessarily involved in the decisions that it is a worth-while process to undertake, and allows people to believe that they can do more than they previously thought possible (Holland, 2012).



How Can This Apply to Sustainability?

- What goals are you planning to reach in your organization? Think in terms of all aspects of sustainability, including energy, climate, water, the built environment, waste, procurement, food, transportation and land use.
- What could you improve in any of the above?

Example

Listen to Dara O’Rourke, A professor at UCB who started GoodGuide and uses this story often to explain what he plans to do with the company. Listen to the beginning of the clip [here](#) until 6:40.

“A VISION STORY RAISES YOUR GAZE FROM CURRENT DIFFICULTIES TO FUTURE PAYOFF THAT SUCCESSFULLY COMPETES WITH THE TEMPTATION TO GIVE UP, COMPROMISE OR CHANGE DIRECTION.”

Annette Simmons (2007)



The 'I-Know-What-You're-Thinking' Story

What is it?

You may go to speak to an audience and expect them to be pre-dispositioned to hold set opinions. Most people hold inherent preconceptions, meaning that if they already think that you will have a certain personality or will be talking about a certain aspect of sustainability, then they will automatically look for the negatives from your pitch, even if they are trying not to. Eg: An audience expects you to give an eco-sustainability speech, but instead you counter this and give them a 'this is how this will benefit you economically' speech. One can prepare a response to any negative ideas before they are voiced, as way of gaining a better stand point to make your argument.

These stories are not only needed for when negative preconceptions are in place, but can be used for stories where the audience is expecting one particular bit of information, but you can instead give another.

Why use it?

If the conversation starts by showing you are aware of the preconceptions around your proposal, and even showing that you have previously overcome the issues that the audience may hold against you, you will be able to start the discussion on a much firmer footing, and cast aside certain ideas that the audience may have developed.

This technique often allows you to dismiss their thoughts preemptively, without sounding defensive.

How Can This Apply to Sustainability?

- Often, those involved in sustainability may come up against those who believe that sustainability is important but other matters are more pressing, or those who are skeptical about environmental issues. By initialing countering this by pointing out the ramifications of your issue and how it will directly affect the audience, you will start the discussion on fairer ground.
- This can often be applied to much smaller issues too, such as dealing with minor concerns that have gone unsaid. Simmons (2007) points out that unsaid ideas will “*shrivel*” under cross-examination, leaving people much more open to agreeing with your proposals.

Tips

Validate their point of view as entirely reasonable before you dismiss it - this does nothing to weaken your argument, but means that your opponent is more likely to believe what you are saying.

It might require thinking about this process before the talk and researching viewpoints that don't coincide with your own.

Example

Stewart Brand starts off [this talk](#) of some of the more controversial topics in sustainability, by explaining his environmental background, to dismiss those who would claim him to not have a good enough knowledge of the subject. This is a brilliant example of both a 'Who-Am-I?' and an 'I-Know-What-You're-Thinking' story



Storytelling Techniques

So now you have decided on which type of story to tell, you just have to tell it - but finding a persuasive way to tell it is often hard. By looking for certain techniques that can commonly be applied to stories, you can become a more persuasive story teller.

Appeals to Emotion

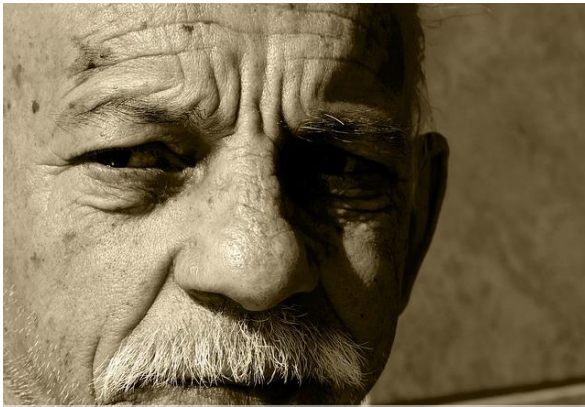


Figure 4 - Emotions can be powerful drivers of stories

Why do it?

Emotion is a powerful tool. A good story has the power to elicit emotion in its audience, as can be amply demonstrated by the impact some people feel from certain movies, where emotional investment in the characters can make what happens to them far more powerful. The same is true in any story you tell, whether the character in the story is you or another.

Many authors seem to believe that a story without emotion is simply a narrative, and the emotional content (rather than the meaning previously discussed) transforms it into a story.

Which emotions should I appeal to?

It is important to appeal to the correct emotions for the point you are trying to make and its intended audience. As Smith (2007) points out, there is no point trying to tell a sad story about puppies to tug at people's heart strings, unless you are trying to sell puppies, otherwise this emotion is useless.

There are a wide range of emotions you can consider appealing to:

- Joy
- Anger
- Pathos
- Sympathy
- Empathy
- Fear
- Disgust
- Trust
- Anticipation

Empathy is perhaps the most useful, allowing the storyteller to transport the audience into his (or his characters') shoes and feel what they feel, to allow the audience to see the world through the character's eyes, even if they won't agree with it.

However, all emotions are useful to appeal to, under different circumstances.

It is important to remember that although emotion can catch people's attention, other steps need to be taken to spur people into action.

"THE GOAL OF... STORIES IS NOT TO HAVE THE READER OR VIEWER AGREE WITH YOU BUT SIMPLY TO CONNECT WITH YOUR WORLDVIEW."

Ted Fickes (2012)



How Can This Apply to Sustainability?

Think about how you can use these emotions to make your point:

- Could you use anger or pathos to make the audience annoyed or concerned about the state of an environmental site?
- Could you use fear and guilt to trigger people into action to support your cause?
- Could you use joy about reaching certain targets to try and allow a process to remain operational?

Brevity

According to legend, a fellow writer challenged Earnest Hemmingway to create an entire story in six words, for a \$10 wager. Much to their shock he responded with a story that elicited an emotional response from those around him. His story read “*For sale: baby shoes, never worn.*”

Figure 5 - Hemmingway famously showed the importance of brevity with his six word story



Although this is an extreme example (called flash fiction), it makes an important point: your story does not have to be long to create its desired effect. Waffling will not help your point - instead it will bore your audience so that they pay less attention to the central tenant of your story. Therefore, it is vital to be concise when telling a story.

“IF I HAD MORE TIME, THIS
WOULD HAVE BEEN A SHORTER
LETTER”

Winston Churchill (and others)

Simmons (2007) points out that a briefer story should take a longer time to compose. It should not be a case of immediately going for the snappy line, but building up a large story before editing it, so that the whole picture will still come across in the story. One should edit out the areas where there are conflicting messages, leaving only a cleaner shorter story, with only one possible interpretation.

It is vital however to check that your edited story still sends the message you intended originally.

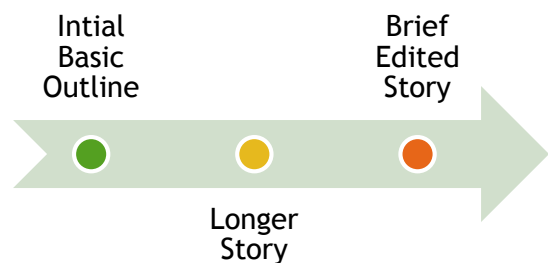


Figure 6 - You must first create a longer story to create a brief one

The Importance of Positive Actions in Stories

When referring to a story of a past action, one can either focus on the positive or negative side. Simmons demonstrates this by considering a plumber coming to your house, explaining you could tell 2 stories:

- 1) The plumber who came initially, charged exorbitant prices and did a shoddy job.
- 2) The second plumber who came to fix the job on the weekend and gave you a good deal, after hearing the story of the first contractor.

By focusing on the first story, you are setting a negative precedent. Although this story does have its uses, it does nothing other than warn of a bad plumber and portray you as a victim. By contrast, the second story sets a much more positive precedent and acts as an inspiration for others to go the extra mile, as he did. Only the second story could be deemed as inspiring positive behavior by the audience.

Therefore, when you are setting up your story, you should always make sure that it sends a positive message.

Eg: Don't tell the story *"We couldn't build turbine in field A due to the planning*



Figure 7 - What is the best way to talk about the planning application for your turbine?

officer creating restrictions; we had to place the turbine in our second choice field."

Instead, tell the story *"The planning officer approved the plan for the turbine in field B, which was in the top two sites we where we wanted to place it."*

The positive action reinforces the idea of positivity towards your projects, meaning that you are more likely to receive a positive response from your audience.

Surprising the audience

When you explain your message, you need to make sure that you capture your audience's attention. The best way of doing this is using the element of surprise in your story.

"A STORY TO ME MEANS A PLOT WHERE THERE IS SOME SURPRISE. BECAUSE THAT IS HOW LIFE IS - FULL OF SURPRISES"



Isaac Bashevis, Singer

Many people listen to stories often, meaning that when one subverts the expectations of what the listener is expecting to hear, the message can really catch their attention.

The act of a surprise can also serve as a memory aid. Having an unusual ending will more likely mean that the brain will remember the message you are trying to convey. Think about some stories you have been told recently - do the ones that stick the most have surprises in them?

Analogies and Metaphors

Analogies and metaphors can be as useful as entire arguments when you are trying to get a specific point across. By choosing an initially complex idea, and explaining it as a far simpler one, you can explain your message without becoming bogged down in the technicalities.

For example, when explaining a subject where there might be a lot of technical language (eg: precise details of technical environmental legislation) can be simplified for certain audiences through an analogy with a process they are more familiar with (eg: a recipe). The complex idea has now been greatly simplified, and the non-technical audience can now far more easily understand your message.

If a message is easier to understand, beyond explaining the idea more simply, it has a few other benefits:

- An analogy or metaphor often proves far more memorable.
- By providing a simpler explanation, there is less chance of some of the audience ‘switching-off.’

Humor

It is important when you tell a story not to just get the message to stick, but rather to spur the audience into doing some positive actions.

Humor is a powerful tool in this respect, as it not only creates the memorable story that we have been talking about previously, but it also acts as a relatable and enjoyable experience for the audience, meaning that they will be more likely to ‘hear the message’ and therefore act on it. The audience will enjoy the joke, whilst the

speaker is still able to make the point he wants.

Know Your Audience

It is important that your story is tailored to your audience. Obviously a pitch you would give to a board of directors needs to differ from that you would give to a group of students.

Gaughen (2013) describes a story like a “multi-faceted crystal” where the overall story is the same, but each face of the crystal represents a different method of storytelling depending on the audience and medium.

It is important to consider a few categories regarding the intended audience before launching into your story:

- Technical Expertise
- Initial Interest
- Age
- Setting

Obviously in the example above, a board of directors requires a much more serious and technical tone than the group of students (where it probably would be a good idea to crack a few jokes to generate more interest in your story).

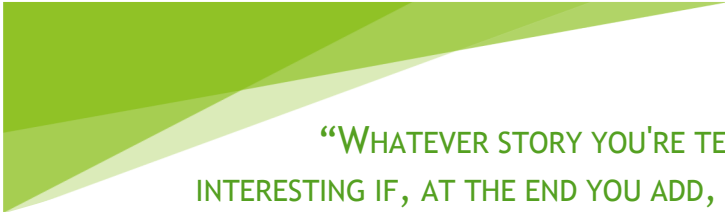


Figure 8 - A Group of Students Might Need a Radically Different Method of Storytelling than a Board of Directors

HOW DO I FIND STORIES?

(Based on Smith (2007) with some additions)

- **Stories from your past** - lessons you have learnt through personal experiences. You can try and think of these under 3 main categories (Smith):
 - Successes
 - Failures
 - Mentors
- **Stories you see happen** - any events that you witness, where a person you know is the 'central character' of the story.
- **Anecdotes from others** - repeat stories you are told by others. Many of these are ready to be repeated immediately in the relevant situation.
 - Ask your colleagues and friends for suggestions for stories that you could use.
- **Stories from strangers** - from articles on the internet, and stories from books.
 - TED Talks (available online at <http://www.ted.com/>)
 - YouTube interviews with members of your industry
 - Books about storytelling are often full of excellent stories that can be reused (eg: those in the references section).



“WHATEVER STORY YOU'RE TELLING, IT WILL BE MORE INTERESTING IF, AT THE END YOU ADD, "AND THEN EVERYTHING BURST INTO FLAMES.”

Brian P. Cleary



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Printed on August 13, 2014