



**Communities
In Motion**



Digital Storytelling Toolkit Module 2 – Telling a Story



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Telling A Story

Digital stories are short. This means that you must decide on a specific moment or experience or theme or concept or outcome to reflect on and to tell us (the audience) about. This focused approach is the core of a good story. Once the focus has been determined, there is a basic formula for any good story: [Action](#) + [Reflection](#) = Story

Let's talk about the action part of that equation. Action is literally asking you: "What happened?"

Action (...and Emotion)

What we're looking for here are details about what happened. The more specific you can be to your experience of the moment, the more others will relate to your story. It's counter-intuitive, but it's true. Even if you are using a digital story as a knowledge translation tool (e.g., a research project), you still need a moment in order to create a successful digital story. A digital story is always a personal narrative, so you must relate your work through personal story.

Show, Don't Tell

Movies are like mirrors. Think of your favourite horror movie – the actor screams on the screen, and you scream too. Emotions are revealed through the action in the story. Emotions are very important, because they bring us together across difference. For example, let's explore Eric's story from the Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 (<http://www.communitystorystrategies.ca/project/eric/>). I have no idea what it's like to be an immigrant from the Congo, but I do know what hope, fear, joy, pain and resilience are like. So I can identify with any story that contains human emotions. BUT, if I merely name my emotions ("I was sad."), they will remain abstract ideas. People will feel sorry for me. There's an old writer's adage: show, don't tell. When I can actually describe what specifically happened to make me feel sad, everyone will feel it along with me ("I remember the day I stood up in class to do my presentation. My English wasn't fluent like everyone else's, and my classmates started laughing at me.").

Reflection

Now action alone is not enough for a good story. Have you ever had a little kid tell you a story? It was probably a laundry list of what happened – "This happened, then this happened, then this happened..." And you politely listen to this very boring story thinking to yourself "What's your point kid?!" That's because stories also require reflection in order to make sense.

"Why *this* story, why now?" is the key question any journalist must answer before they pitch a story to their editor or producer. You must be able to articulate what it is about this story that has relevance for more than just you. This requires a story to have insight.

In an academic context, your insight may have to do with research outcomes, or social impacts of a project, or knowledge transfer about a specific subject. In any case, the process of story development is the same. For example, to make a digital story about research outcomes, tell us what those outcomes were, then tell us a moment as an example so we can see where your insight came from.

Here's an example of a knowledge translation digital story (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtCbBlRu5vg>) we made that shared the outcomes of our arts residency at a community health centre in the west end of Toronto. There are facts and figures we want to make sure people knew from our story, but we also wanted to pass on insights for future artists working the health care sector.

In one workshop we facilitated, a man told a story about how much he loved his father. He said that as a boy he loved this father, as a teenager he loved his father, as a young man he loved his father, and that now as a middle-aged man, as his father lay on his death bed, he thought about how much he loved his father. This story is nice, but nothing changes. He loves his father from the beginning to the end of the story, which is just a statement of fact and not a story. So we asked him if there was ever a moment when he didn't love his father. He said no, there was never a moment in his entire life when he didn't love his father. But...there was a time when his father didn't love him. It turned out that as a young adult, the storyteller came out as a gay, and his father rejected him. So although he loved his father all the time, he felt that his father did not love him. It was on his deathbed that his father told the storyteller that he was wrong to reject his son and that he loved him and had always loved him, even if he had made mistakes along the way. Now the story made sense. It was his father who changed, and that was the point of the story. If nothing changes in your story, it probably won't make sense as a story. This story is a powerful example that another key thing to remember about reflection is something has to change.

When you sit down to write your script, it's very important that you write the way you talk, because you are ultimately going to share this as an oral story. When we're reading, we have the luxury of re-reading a sentence we don't understand or pausing to digest an idea. In fact, as readers, we do this so naturally that we don't even notice it. But as listeners, we don't have these luxuries. So if people speak in really complicated sentences, it can be really hard to follow an idea. Similarly, high diction and poetic language can be really hard to follow. Plain language is really helpful in an oral story. Just write like you talk. And then write the script from the recording.

HOLD UP! WAIT A MINUTE!!!

I just told you to record yourself telling the story, and then write a script that you're going to record...why not just use your initial recording? Here's the thing: Usually, when we tell a story, we tend to ramble, repeat ourselves, and go on tangents. The purpose of script-writing in a digital story is concision – to keep the story short and sweet. A digital story script is usually about 250 to 350 words. And the reason to keep it short and sweet? There's a formula for

video editing: 1 minute of finished movie = 1 - 3 hours of editing. So editing your script before you record your voice saves you a lot of time when you start video editing.

Group Stories

We've also created group digital stories as a method of gathering data from more than one person about the impacts our outcomes of a project. Group digital stories can be a great knowledge translation tool. Group digital stories are a little more complicated to make, but the elements remain the same: gather reflections from the group (outcomes, impacts, data), then gather action (personal experiences to back up the data). Here's an example of a group digital story we created with a community health centre about their childminder program (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdw63ZONOHHA>), sharing the impacts on women who have participated in the program.

Tips for Profs: A traditional digital story script is between 250 and 450 words. Consider integrating the development of the script into your assignment requirements. For example, you could task students to create digital stories related to the course and include, as one of the components of the assignment, the creation and assessment of the script prior to the creation of the final digital story. In this way, you will be able to evaluate students in a way that is nested into the assignment outcome (i.e., the digital story), monitor that they are on track, identify and address any concerns among students with the process, and provide students with valuable feedback on the content of their projects.