

MASTERING STORYTELLING HANDBOOK

NARRATIVE WRITING



Tell me the facts and I'll learn.
Tell me the truth and I'll believe.
But tell me a story and it will live
in my heart forever...

old Native American proverb

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WHAT TO EXPECT

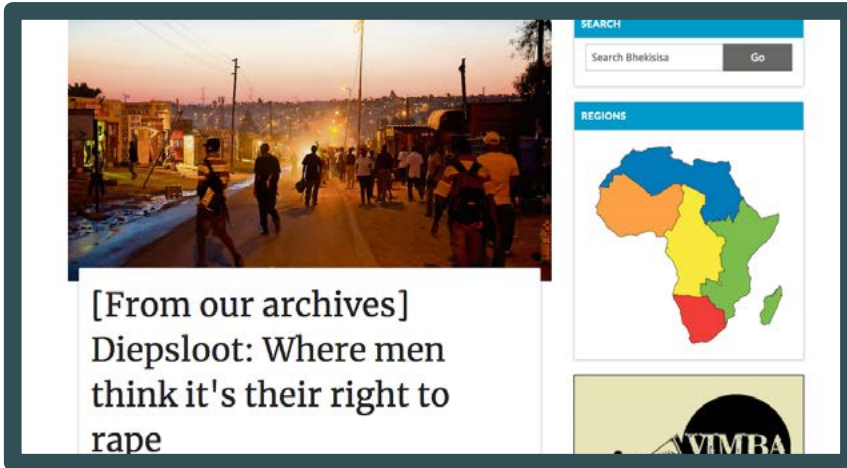
HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook focuses on mastering storytelling. The term ‘storytelling’ refers to a particular way of approaching a story, irrespective of the media format one is working in. It is often described as a narrative style, and it requires an understanding of specific techniques that can be applied. While the handbook cannot practically ‘teach you storytelling’ in a way that a face-to-face course with practical workshopping and exercises can, it does introduce you to the techniques and principles that underpin classic storytelling.

Storytelling for video and audio media formats has some very specific additional techniques and skills that are applied, and depends on having a basic understanding of visual and audio ‘grammar’ (these are subjects for different modules), but the storytelling principles that one might apply to a text story or article or blog post are universal to all media formats – this handbook introduces you to those principles.

Each section of the handbook ends with a reference to a video clip that can be viewed once you have read the entire handbook, or as you progress through each part of the handbook.

There are two video clips that focus specifically on storytelling. In the clips Mia Malan references two specific stories, they are:



Diepsloot: Where men think it's their right to rape



<http://bhekisisa.org/article/2015-10-01-diepsloot-where-men-think-its-their-right-to-rape>



God make us strong, I beg you, keep Lumphumlo alive'



<http://bhekisisa.org/article/2011-11-11-god-make-us-strong-i-beg-you-keep-lumphumlo-alive>



The Narrative Storytelling video clips include:

- **Mia Malan: Perspectives on Storytelling**
 - **Mia Malan: An Approach to Structure and Imagery.**
- In this video Mia references her award-winning story**

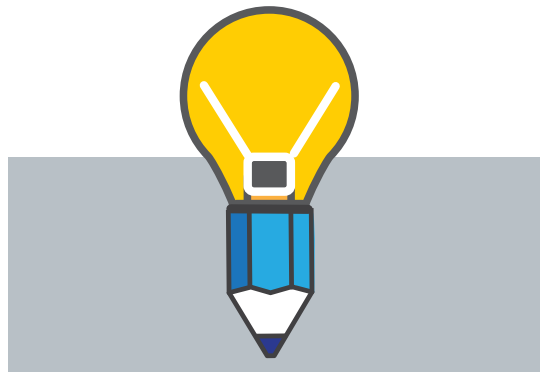
The handbook also references a video clip featuring West African media personalities Dianne Senghor and Venance Konan, where they hold a conversation sharing perspectives about social media and its impact on storytelling.

WHAT IS NARRATIVE STORYTELLING

The simplest and most effective way to pass on information is to use the technique of narrative (storytelling), and to apply a narrative structure to the information; it's common to all tribes and all cultures, anywhere on the planet, through the ages, and it is effective because the human brain is hardwired to digest and retain information packaged in this way.

Unfortunately we have forgotten how to do this, and instead have become caught up in proving we are experts by relaying endless facts and figures in the hope that scientific data, a pie chart or graph will move audiences to feel or act on something we are sharing - they will not. A simple way to know if a story is good is to test how well it is remembered. If we can strike the right balance between the facts and data, and storytelling, we will stand a better chance of making an impact.

Good storytelling does not require fancy equipment or budgets. It requires creativity, imagination, integrity and an absolute dedication to bringing our audiences understanding or insight. We need to get an audience to care about the information we are sharing - whether emotionally, aesthetically or intellectually.



THE IDEA

All stories begin with an idea. You will only establish if the idea is worth turning into a story if you ask yourself a handful of very basic questions:





- Will my audience care about this issue? What can I do to help them to care?
- Do the issues in the story affect my audience? How?
- Will the story enhance my audience’s understanding of an issue/s?
- Does the story strike an emotional chord?
- Will the story inspire my audience to take some action or advocate for change?
- Will the audience have gained some insight?

It is really important to scrutinise an idea, and to ask yourself ‘who cares, so what?’ If you can get the audience to care about what you are relaying, then you are onto an idea that has ‘story legs’.



The best way to make an idea relevant and try to evoke feeling is to tell stories about people, not institutions. So, when you evaluate a story idea, look for people who are genuinely involved, rather than simply being observers. The best stories depict ‘ordinary’ people whom the audience is able to identify with, because that is when a story has a better chance of appealing to the audience’s self-interest.

In summary, good storytelling is about:

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What happens to people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How they feel about it | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What they can or cannot do about it and why | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What others can or cannot do about it and why they should care about it |



THE IDEA

We need to accept that the departure point for the audience is more than likely that they don't share our same passion for a 'cause'; this places pressure on us to find and tell stories that are personal and emotional, so that audiences can relate to the people in the story on a human level and make a connection with an issue or topic through the people in the story.

NON STORYTELLING APPROACH

The Levbombo Health Clinic provides nutrition care to more than 1500 patients a year. It is a first class programme that has excellent outcomes.

STORYTELLING APPROACH

Ayanda remembers thinking "this cannot be happening to me". She was showing symptoms, but she now knows she was in denial. "There was no way I was sick, I didn't have a disease. Less than a day later I almost died."

Ayanda did not die, because she was one of the lucky ones who visited the Levbombo Health Clinic. It ...

The storytelling approach example uses the device of central character or case study through whom a programme or project's work, and/or its positive impact, can be relayed.

Think about what you want to achieve through telling your story: why are you telling it, what's the audience's 'take-out'? Your task as a storyteller is to link the 'case study' to the bigger issue/s or topic being highlighted, and the most effective way to do this is through the use of a central character/s.



VIDEO CLIP REFERENCE

Mia Malan expands on the concept of narrative and storytelling the video clip titled "*Perspectives on Storytelling*"



RESEARCH

Research is a fundamental part of any story you tell. It requires prior work and planning to determine a range of information, such as, for example:



EVENTS

what is happening and what it means



PEOPLE

the characters featured in the story: who is affected, who observes, who is doing what in the story



FACTS

the who, what, when and where background information of the story, not all of which will necessarily be included in your final version



QUESTIONS

the questions you assume might be the same questions your audience has about the issue/topic/event/character responses



CONTEXT

the 'back story - 'old' facts from which your story emerges, or crucial happenings that have led up to your story



LOCATIONS

where the people you will ask questions of will be situated when you ask your questions, and how you will describe location and depict the characters when you tell your story



RESEARCH

Real research means finding and creating meaning out of events, facts and figures – it is your job as the storyteller to do this. Be aware that if facts and figures are not given a context, they will have no meaning and will not contribute to a story in any way. Recording and transmitting an event is also not storytelling, but making it clear to audiences why that event's subject matter impacts people's lives, or relates to their own or other's lives, can be effective.

The challenge is to know which facts to include in a story, and what to leave out, because trying to include too much reduces your audience's ability to understand and care about the story. All good storytellers hone the skill of telling only ONE story at a time, and they do it through case studies, often singling out one central character who weaves all the information together.



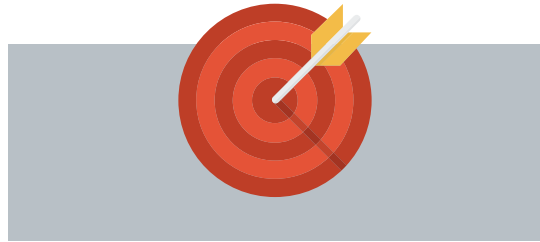
VIDEO CLIP REFERENCE 1

In the video clip titled “*An approach to structure and imagery*” Mia Malan expands on the concept of weaving facts into a narrative and the use of pictures and photographs as part of one's research



VIDEO CLIP REFERENCE 2

In the video clip titled “*Media personalities Dianne Senghor and Venance Konan in conversation about social media*” they talk about the importance of research, particularly when following up on a story idea that has its roots in social media



THE CONCEPT OF FOCUS

Good stories take the audience on a journey, and along the way they ‘meet’ people and understand their role in the story. If the audience is left feeling ‘I don’t get this, am I stupid?’, then we have failed in our duty as storytellers. This often happens when we try to include too much in a story, or we try to cover too many angles in one story. Knowing what to leave out is the biggest challenge you will face, one which the technique of FOCUS can help you with. It arises out of the research you conduct, and defines what the story is NOT about, as much as it defines what the story IS about.

FOCUS is not about having a focal point for a story – instead it relies on deciding which person will be your central character/s in a story, and showing them doing something, or having something done to them, FOR A REASON. The tool that can be used to apply this discipline is called **A FOCUS STATEMENT**.

SOMEONE	>	the WHO of your story
DOING SOMETHING/ABOUT TO DO SOMETHING/HAVING SOMETHING DONE TO THEM	>	the WHAT/WHERE/WHEN and HOW of your story
FOR A REASON	>	the WHY of your story



THE CONCEPT OF FOCUS

EXAMPLE 1 OF A FOCUS STATEMENT

The **EVENT**: A child that has gone missing

THE **FOCUS STATEMENT** THAT GIVES YOU A WAY TO PROGRESS AND NARRATE THIS STORY MIGHT BE:

SOMEONE	A mother/father/policeman/teacher
DOING SOMETHING/ABOUT TO DO SOMETHING/HAVING SOMETHING DONE TO THEM	Looking for a child/missing a child/waiting for the child/co-ordinating a search for the child
FOR A REASON	Because the child has disappeared

EXAMPLE 2 OF A FOCUS STATEMENT

The **ISSUE**: Child brides in country XYZ

THE **FOCUS STATEMENT** THAT GIVES YOU A WAY TO PROGRESS AND NARRATE THIS STORY MIGHT BE:

SOMEONE	Sanelisiwe, the 13 year old girl
DOING SOMETHING/ABOUT TO DO SOMETHING/HAVING SOMETHING DONE TO THEM	Who is not attending school or getting any formal education, and instead is caring all day for a child she has given birth to at the tender age of 13
FOR A REASON	Because her parents do not see how they can benefit from her receiving any formal education and have married her off to an elderly man in the village for 'financial' gain



THE CONCEPT OF FOCUS

The **FOCUS STATEMENT** is actually a full sentence that one writes out when planning a story. It imposes the discipline of staying true to three key elements:



If you have a written out focus statement, it guides you regarding what information to include, and what to leave out. The narrative flow will come from showing the central character doing things, showing others doing things, and speaking to the characters about how they feel. For example:

SOMEONE	Sanelisiwe, the 13 year old girl	Establish Sanelisiwe in her home Interview Sanelisiwe about how she feels about not going to school, being married at such a young age – does she intend to do anything about it? What? When? How?
DOING SOMETHING/ ABOUT TO DO SOMETHING/HAVING SOMETHING DONE TO THEM	Who is not attending school or getting any formal education, and instead is caring all day for a child she has given birth to at the tender age of 13	Show Sanelisiwe doing things such as washing her baby, cradling her baby, cooking etc Could depict other girls her age getting on a bus to go to school, or walking to and from school. Could interview teacher about promise she showed, good marks,
FOR A REASON	Because her parents do not see how they can benefit from her receiving any formal education and have married her off to an elderly man in the village for ‘financial’ gain	Show her parents in their day to day activities, juxtapose, interview father, interview mother, did the same happen to her?



THE CONCEPT OF FOCUS

As you do your research you will come across more people involved in the story, and more facts that relate to the story. Always LITMUS test these against the FOCUS STATEMENT - if they do not fit into the FOCUS STATEMENT or contribute to the story you are planning to tell then they are not crucial to the story and may have to be left out completely. They may well constitute material for follow-up or related stories, but do not try to squeeze them all in to this particular story.



VIDEO CLIP REFERENCE

In the video clip titled “*Perspectives on Storytelling*” Mia Malan expands on the concept of focus.



INTERVIEWS

The storyteller must always be in pursuit of an interview that enables the interviewee to speak from the heart. The interview talent or case studies you select should be chosen on the strength of being a ‘player’ or participant in your story – they should be contributing to your focus statement in some way. This naturally implies they have feelings about the issues you wish to raise, or have been affected by the issue/s in some way - your job as a storyteller is to get them to relay those feelings or actions and activities. It is a skill that takes years to refine.

Too often we default to experts and spokespersons, but they are seldom the ‘real’ people affected by what you are highlighting in the story. Audiences want to see, read about and hear from REAL people, people just like themselves. Experts can reinforce and lend credibility to illustrate the magnitude or gravitas of an issue or event, but they are rarely the storytelling device that will resonate with a non-expert audience.

Story case studies may need help to express themselves publicly, which requires us to apply certain techniques to an interview. Show that you understand the person’s point of view, which does not mean taking sides or making moral judgements. This can only come from speaking to case studies beforehand and building familiarity. Show respect and try to find common ground. Take a stance of being under-informed, which will force you to ask many questions about something, and often the same questions to a number of interviewees - in this way you will get information that later on will enable you to scene-set and tell your story in more narrative and descriptive detail.



VIDEO CLIP REFERENCE

In the video clip titled “*An approach to structure and imagery*” Mia Malan offers insights into how to craft questions for interviews



INTERVIEWS

CHECKLIST OF STORY PLANNING PREPARATION STEPS



1

Come up with your story idea



2

Research the story



3

Identify potential case studies and related interviewees or story 'talent'



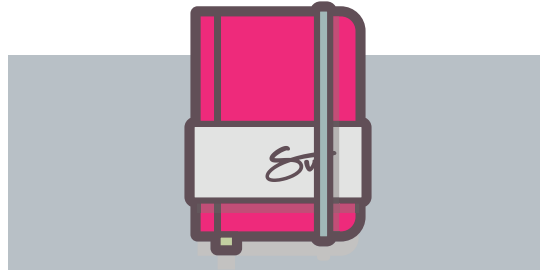
4

Write a focus statement for the story



5

Speak to potential story 'talent' and make your selection of central character/s



WRITING

Even if one does apply focus and a good structure to a story, no amount of storytelling elements can compensate for poor writing. All too often one falls into the trap of using formal, official language that can also be ambiguous, masks meaning and confuses the audience – abstract words cannot evoke emotional response easily. Your challenge as a storyteller is to decode this institutional, coded language and terminology and write in a language that your audience understands. Let go of any desire to prove you are an expert, and just tell the story in a way that the audience will understand. This means using words that people use when they talk to each other.

Best practice principles for effective writing, no matter what the medium, are:

- One thought to a sentence
- Conversational language
- Active verbs
- Simple words
- NO unexplained acronyms, clichés, jargon or industry-speak

Every time your audience sees or hears a word that they do not understand their brain 'stops' to process it – the word has to be connected or associated to something they do understand, something that is stored in their memory, that then enables them to process meaning.

The words you use should be strong enough to replace a photograph or video image if you are working in the written medium; so this means the words you write should help to create those pictures in the audience's mind and vividly paint a picture of the world you are portraying. You cannot make up detail, you have to capture it, describe it and portray it – there is a difference.



WRITING

Set the scene by depicting a place, or a person, or an object. Many writers say they try to appeal by using words that speak to the five senses.

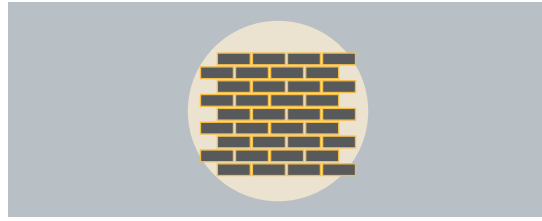
A leading paragraph that creates a mental image lures the reader to go on, read more and follow your points better. So when you tell a story, the focus at the beginning should rarely be on the topic you're trying to get the reader into. Instead you need to 'introduce' the people in the story, the human element, because it is the people who will help you to 'propel' your story through the issues you wish to raise. Take your reader by the hand and describe the landscape the events happen/happened in.

A serious storyteller will always transcribe every word of every interview, and then group what is said about the same thing or issue or topic 'together' - this will help with structuring the story when you begin to compile the final drafts. It is also a technique used by video and audio storytellers.



VIDEO CLIP REFERENCE

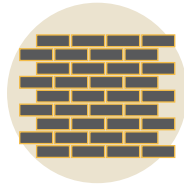
In the video clip titled "*An approach to structure and imagery*" Mia Malan shares views about writing in a way that creates breathing space



STRUCTURE

The simplistic structure for a story is of course a BEGINNING, MIDDLE and END. Classic storytelling, however, includes structural elements that combine to make up a beginning, middle and end. It is these elements that give a story sophistication, and appeal to how the human mind works and responds to information, and it is these elements that help to evoke interest and feeling. There are numerous ‘tools’ that one can use to apply better structure to a story.

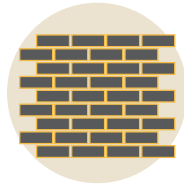
The media platform can also influence the structure of a story. Newspaper print stories, for example, rarely use the classic storytelling structure. Instead, newspapers apply what is called an ‘inverted pyramid’ structure, so they will often start the story at its end (the climax), with the latest information, then they unfold information working backwards. The inverted pyramid isn’t storytelling, it is a collection of facts laid out in reverse order of occurrence, starting most often with the CLIMAX, and then going back to the beginning. It was designed for the print medium. Television and video storytelling, and great written stories, however, can lend themselves to classic storytelling structure through a combined use of pictures (or descriptive words that paint pictures in the minds of the audience), natural sound, music, special effects and editing techniques.



STRUCTURE

THE CLASSIC STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF THE MOST IMPACTFUL STORIES ARE:

CONTEXT	Sets the scene for the audience and shares just enough information to make the audience want to know more
FORESHADOWING	Hints or clues (often subtle) that there may be a dramatic outcome or event about to happen, as opposed to a random collection of facts
DRAMATIC UNFOLDING	Reveals information in an accessible way, usually showing a central character as the device through which to do this, going on some kind of literal or metaphorical journey, or encountering conflicts and challenges along the way
CLIMAX	The end of the journey or point of the story, which can also be a resolution
DENOUNCEMENT or RESOLUTION which does not necessarily apply to all story types	Ties up all the details and wraps up the story



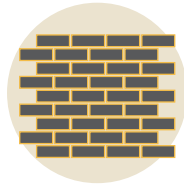
STRUCTURE

While most stories are told chronologically, not all stories need to be told chronologically. The type of story you are telling will lend itself to a particular structure. In the case of news events such as a war or a crash or bomb explosion, it may be necessary to start with the climax and then go backwards to unfold detail that lead up to the event. The flashback technique also ‘breaks the rule’ of telling a story chronologically. A storytelling approach lends itself to unfolding a narrative approach that takes the audience on a journey of discovery through the structural elements. This discovery, which is how the audience ‘gets its satisfaction’, can be compromised if the main points of the story are given away at the beginning.

The interviews one conducts for a story can be powerful tools – in video they allow the characters to relay information in their own words, with their own feeling, which is always more powerful than a paraphrase. In written stories this requires a mix of narrative description and ‘quotes from interviews’ which can give the kind of detail that enables the storyteller to describe context and settings in a manner that helps to paint pictures in the minds of audience. The reason for using either literal pictures or words that help to paint pictures is because the human brain processes information better when it is supported by an image. This is the greatest challenge for text and audio storytellers – painting pictures for the audience with the words used. If you are working with video, the camerawork and editing literally construct the pictures and the visual grammar can help to reinforce meaning.








Simply telling an audience what has happened is NOT storytelling. It does give one shortcuts, and does mean one can bypass the disciplines of working out a focus statement and structure for the story, but it will never be as effective or memorable for the audience as an approach that subscribes to the principles of classic storytelling.

Be mindful that a key element of stories in a converged media landscape is the INTRODUCTION or INTRO. A good INTRO can ‘sell’ a bad story, a bad INTRO can destroy a good story. A good intro offers just enough information to ‘tease’ the audience, so that they want to find out more. The job of the INTRO is to start and sell the story to the audience, the story’s job is to tell the story. Write your INTRO first because it will help to guide the flow of your story, and should arouse the interest of the audience, but be prepared to re-write it several times as your story progresses.



STRUCTURE

CHECKLIST OF STORY PRODUCTION STEPS

-  1. Transcribe every word of every interview
-  2. Take pictures of locations and settings as reference material to help describe settings
-  3. Write by applying best practice writing techniques
-  4. Decide which parts of information fit into structural elements surfaced in Part VI
-  5. Be prepared to re-write several drafts experimenting with different structures or running orders
-  6. Write a teaser intro first, redraft it once you have a final draft done
-  7. Litmus test everything you include against the original FOCUS STATEMENT written during your planning and preparation stages - if it does not contribute to the focus statement, leave it out



VIDEO CLIP REFERENCE

In the video clip titled “*Perspectives on Storytelling*” Mia Malan expands on the principles of structure



ADDITIONAL READING



<http://study.com/>



<https://www.thinkib.net/>



<http://www.creativenonfiction.org/>



<https://www.museweb.us/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2-StorytellingBasics-StorytellingHandbook-v1.pdf>



www.americanpressinstitute.org



<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/journalism/isaacs/edit/MencherIntv1.html>