

Breaking Down Barriers: Exploring Migration Stories and Local Heritage with Young People

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Digital Storytelling Toolkit: Part Two

Writing a Digital Story

Toolkit produced by Melting Pro



Writing a digital story

Digital storytelling first begins with constructing a story.

In this file, you will find some tips on story writing, and also prompts and exercises to help you find an idea for a story.

Stories are told in the first person and should be structured around a theme. Stories are prepared using a mixture of group work and individual work – where participants brainstorm ideas together and share potential stories, and give each other feedback in ‘story circles’. This process leads to the refining of a script. This step should not be rushed as it frames the way in which the story develops, and takes significant commitment from participants who are finding a way of telling their story, often for the first time.

Individual and group exercises can provide a space for participants to develop their story and their script. This may involve working with the ‘story arc’ to plot the beginning, middle and end of the story, and then developing this over the course of the workshop in collaboration with others.

Explore key elements such as characters, style and tone, and think about engaging all six senses to help make the story come alive. Key questions to ask in building the story are: Where is the dramatic moment—the actual moment in time when something momentous occurs? What does this story reveal about the topic? Why is it necessary to tell this story? Do you open by

grabbing the reader's interest in hearing this story? Do you end in a way that suits your objective?

Key elements of a good story

Theme. A theme is something important the story tries to tell us—something that might help us in our own lives. Don't get too preachy. Let the theme grow out of the story, so readers feel they've learned it for themselves. You shouldn't have to say what the moral is.

Plot. Plot is most often about a conflict or struggle that the main character goes through. The conflict can be with another character, or with the way things are, or with something inside the character, like needs or feelings. The main character should win or lose at least partly on their own, and not just be rescued by someone or something else. Most often, the character learns or grows as they try to solve their problem. The conflict should get more and more tense or exciting. The tension should reach a high point or "climax" near the end of the story, then ease off. The basic steps of a plot are: conflict begins, things go right, things go WRONG, final victory (or defeat), and wrap-up. The right-wrong steps can repeat. A novel can have several conflicts, but a short story should have only one.

Story Structure. At the beginning, jump right into the action. At the end, wind up the story quickly. Decide about writing the story either in "first person" or in "third person." Third-person pronouns are "he," "she," and "it"—so writing in third person means telling a story as if it's all about other people. The first-person pronoun is "I"—so writing in first person means telling a story as if it happened to you.

Even if you write in third person, try to tell the story through the eyes of just one character—most likely the main character. Don't reveal anything that the character wouldn't know. This is called "point of view." If you must reveal something else, create a whole separate section with the point of view of another character.

Decide about writing either in "present tense" or in "past tense." Writing in past tense means writing as if the story already happened. That is how most stories are written. Writing in present tense means writing as if the story is happening right now. Stick to one tense or the other!

Characters. Before you start writing, know your characters well. Your main character should be someone readers can feel something in common with, or at least care about. You don't have to describe a character completely. It's enough to say one or two things about how a character looks or moves or speaks.

A main character should have at least one flaw or weakness. Perfect characters are not very interesting. They're also harder to feel something in common with or care about. And they don't have anything to learn. In the same way, there should be at least one thing good about a "bad guy."

Turning Points. Identifying a significant moment of change within the narrative helps participants to understand what it was, that brought new insights and perspectives in the subject they are exploring. The way in which the story is then built before and after this moment of change will determine the way in which the audience engages in that journey of change (Lambert 2013).

Making a Start: Story Prompts

The most difficult part is to start writing the story. No matter what you have in mind, the *blank page syndrome* is around the corner.

For this reason, the Story Center of Berkeley and organisations like them use some tools as a prompt to start writing.

The 4 x 6 Index Card

Of all the suggestions that the Story Center has made to help people prepare for writing, the use of 4 x 6 index cards has garnered the most praise. The idea is simple: you use a 4 x 6 index card with the following instruction on it:

“You have 10 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.”

The card is small, and it is finite. It seems possible, and perhaps even easy to fill. So for the novice, it is a way to be at ease, while for confident writers, this exercise is a creative challenge.

The 4 x 6 card also helps condense the narrative, by breaking the story down to its most basic elements.

Writing Exercises

There are countless prompts that might work for various situations. Here is a short list of some themes for prompts, which could form the basis of some powerful stories.

10 minutes for each prompt is the right time to allocate.

- This is a post card. Choose a person that you think this story is for, and write them a postcard about the story. Start with, “Dear...”

- The Road Not Taken. Write about a decisive moment in your life (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)

- draw a map of the neighbourhood where you grew up. Reaching back in one’s memory to locate the layout of the streets, where friends lived, the names of friendly or strange neighbours, 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, usually leads quickly to recalling events that are rich with the kinds of meaningful elements that make good stories

- Tell the story of a mentor or hero in your life.

- Tell the story of a time when “it just didn’t work”—a point, in your job or some other event or activity, when you would’ve usually been competent or successful, and how that all changed when everything fell apart before your eyes.

- Describe a time when you felt really scared

- Describe an occasion when you did something for the first time and how it made you feel and the impact it possibly caused for others

Stories from Pictures

Digital stories often start with pictures. Look around your 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, 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 the next step after a successful draft of the narrative.

If you find that you would like to see an image in your story that you don’t have available, you can look for an illustration, or appropriately implicit or metaphorical images that suit the purposes of your story

Make Your Mind Up

Write about a time in your life when you made an important decision. You are free to describe it as you wish, but you are limited to exactly 50 words.

This game fulfils two purposes. Primarily it looks at the theme of important decision making in life and the resulting feelings that were created. Secondly, it attempts to instil in participants the value of a tightly edited text.

TIPS FOR TRAINERS: The level and type of input required during script writing varies from group to group. The role of the trainer is to collaborate with the storyteller for the good of the story itself. Here a balance must be struck between interference and neglect! The trainer should try and keep each story within the DS framework parameters, whilst guiding the storyteller in the content of their story.

TIPS FOR WRITERS:

Don't sit about looking at a blank sheet. Give yourself a time limit and just write. Don't judge at the beginning.

Remember that spoken words are only heard once, in contrast to the written word which can be re-examined. Clarity is important. Avoid repetition unless it is deliberate. Find other words. Don't use literary expressions or connecting phrases like "as I mentioned before". They will jar on the ear.

Find your own voice. Don't imitate. Be aware of how you like to use words and have the confidence to use your own idiom.

Picture what you are writing about in as much detail as possible - feelings, colours, textures, smells, etc. This will influence how you write.

You don't have lots of words so dive in. There's no need to tell the story in a linear way, even though it will require a beginning, middle and end. Find what's most arresting and start there. It may be from any point in your narrative.

Don't get too attached to the exact facts. Don't let them get in the way of the truth.

Try your story out on others and get feedback. What works and what doesn't? Are you being clear? Have you left out something important that was there originally?

Less is more. Expect to re-write and re-write. Edit rigorously. What is the essence of your story? Attempt to express that in one sentence. Now make sure that you have nothing unnecessary. Does everything move the story on?

Avoid cliché and banal sentiments. Phrases like "he's always there for me" are worn-out. Look for a fresh form of words. Generalities are lazy and close things down. The specific, well observed detail is what will resonate.

Remember that, while an anecdote can meander, a story needs structure. The end needs to have some connection with the beginning to be satisfying. Think of stepping stones. When you reach the other bank of the river you should still be able to see the bank from which you started the journey.

And the stepping stones are important. They are the steps that build the story. Make sure you haven't missed a vital step out.

Treat your story with respect as if it was the best story in the world!