

A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS
OF STORY CREATION AND ENHANCEMENT

From
Plot
to
Narrative

ELIZABETH
ELLIS

"I love the way this step-by-step manual breaks the writing process down to bite-sized pieces, helping us discover new veins of meaning and humor in our material."

– **Megan Hicks** Storyteller, Media, Pennsylvania <http://www.meganhicks.com>

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition, 2012

2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018
16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ellis, Elizabeth, 1943-

From plot to narrative : a step-by-step process of story creation and enhancement / Elizabeth Ellis. -- 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-935166-81-8 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-935166-81-6 (pbk.)

ISBN-13: 978-1-935166-82-5 (ebk.)

ISBN-10: 1-935166-82-4 (ebk.)

1. Narration (Rhetoric) 2. Storytelling. I. Title.

PN212E55 2012

808.036--dc23

2012005771

This book is printed on archival-quality paper that meets requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences, Permanence of Paper, Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Cover and page design:

Acquired for Parkhurst Brothers Inc., Publishers by:

Editor:

Illustrator:

092012

Harvill Ross Studios Ltd.

Ted Parkhurst

Barbara Paddack

Mr. Piecrust

Contents

Introduction	8
Laying the Foundation	15
Picturing the Plot	18
Layer One: Context	23
Layer Two: Conflict	31
Layer Three: Sensory Imagery	37
Layer Four: Characterization	45
Layer Five: Point of View	50
Layer Six: Emotion	57
Layer Seven: Connection	67
Layer Eight: Humor	72
Layer Nine: Wisdom	79
Layer Ten: Word Choice	85
Putting It All Together	91
Sharing It Aloud	94
Index	108

LAYER ONE

Context

**Tip: No need to begin a story with,
“Before I begin my story I need to tell you that . . .”
Any needed information can be
built into the body of the story itself.**

*“The noblest pleasure is the joy of understanding.”
– Leonardo da Vinci*

One of the first things we want to ask is, “What does the listener need to know in order to be fully engaged in this story?” You will want to give some thought to what information your listener needs in order to understand what is happening or why it is important. We have all been in situations where we felt like outsiders because we didn’t know important elements about what was being presented. And what was our response? Usually we spent more time thinking about what we didn’t know than what was being presented. Often it took us completely out of the story. We worried the unknown details like a terrier with a bone.

Sometimes the needed information is simple and can be handled with:

“When I was a child in Cleveland . . .”

or

“My grandfather’s hardware store was the scene of much of my childhood.”

These statements give context that gives us a setting, an idea of where the story is taking place.

Sometimes we need a sense of time in order to understand.

“I remember being in the third grade. It sticks out in my mind, because....”

or

“The year my wife and I were married, John Kennedy was in the White House.”

or

“Long before Columbus failed to discover a trade route to India....”

These openings set us in time, but they have the added bonus of creating in us a desire to hear more, to be curious about what will happen next.

There might be unusual words or phrases in the story. Context means giving your listener an understanding of what they mean.

“I picked up my scythe, that long sharp blade I used for cutting hay, and....”

or

“He came out carrying a calabash, a large dried gourd for storing things.”

Don't assume the participants know everything you know. I grew up on a farm. But I have discovered that the names and uses of basic farming implements are not known to those raised in the city. They know the word tractor, but if there is a harrow or a drag sled in the story, you might as well be speaking Greek if you don't build in some definitions for them. The younger your listeners, the less life experience they have under their belts and the greater the need for helping them understand what is happening in the story. At Christmas every year, I build into my story a definition of the word inn for the little ones. I don't assume they know what it means.

How far is a furlong? How fast is a knot? Stewing about these things can take your listener right out of the story. Hold them in the tale by giving them needed information in an artistic manner. It can be done smoothly with only a little practice.

The need for context may be more than giving the simple definition of a word.

If you are telling a family story, they may need to know something about the relationships of the people involved. Or perhaps about the family's structure or heritage.

A story I tell about my aunt and my mother has much more meaning for my listeners if they understand that for more than twenty years the two of them were next-door neighbors, but they did not speak. Not a word.

Dan Keding (www.dankeding.com) gives us funny and moving stories from his complicated childhood with adroit use of context. He helps you maneuver through Catholic school, the South Side of Chicago, and a Croatian grandmother without getting lost.

In a folktale there may be customs that are unknown or misunderstood. The tale will mean much more if your listener knows that arranged marriage is the acceptable norm for this culture. There will be a special significance to knowing that the bride wants to speak privately to the man she is arranged to marry. The need for absolute secrecy not only adds to our understanding, it adds to the suspense, as well.

A story from historical sources may require a great deal of context before your listeners are comfortable with the story. They may need to know far more than can be shared with just a simple definition of a word. Informing their listening is an important part of the storyer's art. The historical works of storyteller Judith Black

(www.storiesalive.com) are an excellent example.

The same is true of stories from the Bible or other sacred text. Our understanding of the story and its meaning can only be enhanced by knowing the customs of the times and the places from which these stories come.

It is not enough to give people the needed information. We want to share it with them in an artistic manner that does not seem clumsy or interrupt the flow of the story.

Some useful techniques for sharing context are:

- dialog
- flashback
- letters
- newspapers
- diaries or journals

Dialog. It is far more interesting to hear two characters in a story talking to one another than it is to receive a lecture full of abstract facts. The same factual information can be absorbed by the listener easily if it is presented in an entertaining form. It is natural that an older person in the family would be giving information to a younger one. A local would have a lot that they could tell a newcomer. An old hand could be informing a new employee. Each of these scenarios would allow for sharing lots of needed factual information.

A few years ago I was asked by a local science museum to present a program to accompany a large robotic whale exhibit. They wanted the family audience to come away with a picture of what life was like when whaling was an important part of the American economy. I did some research and discovered it would be challenging to help others see how different life was

in the whaling villages because they were so much like things are all over the United States today. Because the whaling villages had been founded by Quakers, men and women were treated as equals. Most of the businesses were woman owned and run. At a time when African-Americans in the rest of the country were being held in bondage, Quakers treated them as equals. There were black ship captains and businessmen.

To help the listeners understand the whaling industry, I created a young man who was going out on his first whaling voyage. All the information about hunting for whales in the 1700s was given to the listeners in dialog between the first mate and our hero who was new to the ship and asking lots of questions. It was an effective way to inform them.

Later in the story the young man, older now, marries and brings his bride from the South to live in Nantucket. Through her eyes the listeners got to see the sharp contrast between life in the rest of the United States and in the whaling villages. As the newcomer from a “different culture,” she had lots of opportunity to comment about the differences between her old home and the new place she had come to live.

Flashback. We want the listener to enter the story at an interesting and compelling moment in the tale. We want to catch their attention and hold it. The flashback gives us the opportunity to fill in any missing information from the past. It may answer the question,

“What happened before this?”

or

“How did we get in this situation?”

If you think about it for a moment, I imagine you have seen this technique used in many novels and films. Robert Ludlum

uses this technique effectively in *The Bourne Identity*, as Jason is regaining his memory. I tell several stories where the importance of what is happening in my adult life is given by flashbacks into my childhood.

Letters. Using letters can be an effective way to share needed factual information with your listeners. They might be historical letters from real people, such as using the letters between John and Abigail Adams to inform us about the writing of the Declaration of Independence. However, they could also be letters invented to fit the needs of the participants of the story. You might read from a letter that explains the importance of a discovery or an invention to give needed context for understanding the consequence of the event.

One of the big advantages to this method is you can “read” the letters to your audience. Of course, you will want to know the content very well so that you do not have to lose significant eye contact with your listeners while sharing it with them. But, using this method can make it possible to have a lot of dates or numbers readily available to share with your listeners without having to memorize all those facts.

An example of this epistolary style is seen in the novel *Fair and Tender Ladies* by Lee Smith. The author has set it in Appalachia and makes great use of letters both to give context and to develop the character of Ivy Roe, a most memorable young woman.

Jon Spelman (www.jonspelman.com), a storyteller from the Washington, D.C., area, has a very moving storytelling program called “War Stories: Nam.” In it he makes effective use of reading pieces of letters from soldiers to the participants. Not only does it bring these men to life for us, it allows for the sharing of actual information about the war in a way that is artistic and impactful.

Newspapers. You can employ the same technique using newspapers instead of letters. Like the use of letters, what you share can be historical or imaginary.

Lucinda Flodin and her late husband, Dennis Fredrick – called the Story Weavers – used this technique successfully in their story about how women won the right to vote. Dennis would pretend to read to his wife from the newspaper, thereby giving details of the history of the struggle for women’s suffrage. The listeners also got a wonderful view of the two main characters in the story by hearing their interaction at the breakfast table over the newspaper.

Diaries or Journals. This can be very useful in establishing the involvement of the character in the story in events of the time you wish to tell about. It can also be a way of showing the private thoughts of a character, a way to share doubts or feelings with the listener. Some selections from your father’s journal during World War II can give needed information, but can have the extra advantage of letting us know how your father felt about it. By sharing from a diary or journal you kept at some point in your life, you can give us background information, but you can also show us what kind of person you were at that time in your life.

“Silver Spurs” is a powerful story Beth Horner (www.bethhorner.com) has developed from a Civil War diary kept by her great-great-grandfather.

Exercise. Look at the pictures in the storyboard that you have made of the plot of your story. Think about each picture in turn. What does your listener need to know to fully understand the story? There may be several places where you find your listener will need context in order to be fully engaged in the story. Some of them may be small pieces of information that can be handled quickly. Others may require much more. On your storyboard, mark each of these spots in the story with a stick-on flag. This

will alert you to the need for providing context at this point in the story. As you develop your story, you may use some of the techniques that have been suggested. Or you may come up with a method uniquely your own. The important thing to remember is to give the needed information in a way that does not interfere with the natural flow of the story.

