



# STORY TRAINING

*Selecting and Shaping Stories*

— That Connect —

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HADIYA NURIDDIN

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PRESS

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Book**

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*To my mother, Badriyyah Nuriddin, for  
her love, dedication, and friendship*

*To my father, Asmar Nuriddin, for his  
love, encouragement, and support*


*To my sister, Alex Morris, for showing  
me what strength looks like*

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## INTRODUCTION

# Finding the Storyteller

t was a training emergency. Human resources at the bank where I had been working for about three years had just reversed the annual performance management scale so that the best performers, who were previously given “1” ratings, would now receive “5” ratings. The bank’s performance management course now had to be updated to reflect the change. My manager asked me to take the lead and then teach the course a few weeks later.

It was the early 2000s and instructional design was new to me, but as I worked through the course, it soon became clear that it was not a course at all. It was human resources policies copied onto slides. I shuddered at the thought of spending two days reading sections of the employee handbook aloud to a group. The course needed to be redesigned, but at that point in my career, I had only designed and facilitated courses that were a few hours long—never a multiday class like this one. I agreed to teach the current course, but asked my manager to let me design a brand-new performance management course to teach the next time around. He agreed.

I used the case study approach and created characters whom the participants would take through the performance management process. It had a lot of moving parts and was unlike any of the other management courses our training department offered. My course design was probably needlessly complicated, but I wanted to add variability, and that was difficult to do with only static worksheets and participant guides.

After a month of designing, writing, and getting feedback from other trainers, it was time to teach my new two-day course. I was nervous—scared that I would forget to copy a worksheet or a game card or some other component that the participants would need. I invested so much time and energy into this course because it marked the beginning of my transition from trainer to serious instructional designer. I obsessed over everything that could go wrong. How would I remember everything? What if the course ran too long or too short? Would people like it?

On the first day, at 8:35 a.m., I started with a scenario to get the participants engaged. I then asked them to introduce themselves. Half way through the introductions, it became apparent that I had the least amount of work experience in the room. I stopped asking follow-up questions and just stared as each person talked about how many people they managed and how long they had been in their current leadership role. When introductions were finished, I felt numb as I faced 20 people who had each spent a minimum of five years in management. Most had been managers longer than I had been an adult.

For the first time, throughout the design and delivery process of the course, I came face-to-face with the reality that I had never been a manager in my life. I had never managed anyone's performance, so I had never given a performance review. I had never talked to anyone about giving a performance review. I had zero experience assessing performance, coaching, or giving feedback. All I knew was the content I was given as source material for the course, and my own experience receiving performance reviews. And while I had taught many classes on topics I had no experience in before, this felt different because instead of teaching them how to do something new, I was coaching them on how



to improve a job they had been doing for years—a job I’d never had. I was in way over my head.

## **How Do You Solve a Problem Like Darla?**

I was able to get through that first morning by focusing on the content. I avoided being exposed as the fraud that I felt like I was until we started discussing the case studies. There were four, each one assigned to a group of five participants. Each study featured a different character who had one of four core traits: ambitious, lazy, mediocre, or combative. My combative character, Darla, also used to be each participant’s fictional peer. She received the most attention—as is often the case with problem employees. The case study had details about each employee’s imaginary work and personal life, but the group assigned to Darla took the liberty of giving her a backstory they made up based on their experiences with problem employees. They vilified Darla in ways I could have never dreamed up.

It turned out that employees like Darla were the reason everyone was there. They could manage good employees—or so they thought—but people like Darla had driven them to take the course. Most wanted to fire Darla immediately after reading one of her sarcastic emails. When I told them that they had no grounds to fire her, they naturally wanted to know what they were supposed to do. Could they transfer her to another branch? Should they begin progressive discipline? Should they just ignore her? They did not want to hear more theories. They did not want to hear what other participants had tried. They wanted to hear what they were supposed to do about a problem like Darla from me, a trainer in the human resources department and, obviously, an experienced manager (or why else would I be teaching the course?). I, of all people, must know.

I did not.

During lunch, I considered my options. I felt my credibility slipping, and I needed to do something about it. I concluded that the group was not asking me how to deal with Darla, but how to avoid dealing with her. Making a problem disappear was easier than taking it head-on. But I knew that just telling them that would not work—they were beyond that point. I also noticed my attitude toward the group changing. I wanted to



defend this made-up woman who had aroused so many emotions. I was bothered by how they talked about her and I wanted to suggest that they try empathy. While it was not the answer they were looking for, empathy is always a step in the right direction.

## **“Why Don’t You Like Me?”**

After welcoming everyone back from lunch, still unsure of what to do, I decided to say what was on my mind:

About a year or two after graduating from college, I worked in a copy shop. I was not a manager or a supervisor. I made the actual copies. This was not the good fortune my bachelor’s degree was supposed to bring me, but it’s where I was, and I was not happy about it. I did my job, but I had a manager and hated it. I didn’t hate my manager specifically. I hated that I had a manager. I undermined him behind his back by giving my co-workers unsolicited opinions on everything from the way he managed our last meeting to what kind of car he drove.

After a few months of this, he confronted me during a performance review.

“Why don’t you like me?” he asked.

“What?” I replied, holding my hand to my chest to cover the wound. I was shocked.

“I know you don’t like me,” he said, his voice trembling a bit, but never looking away. “That’s fine. I’m not everyone’s cup of tea, but people do like and respect you, and your opinion matters to them.”

I was putting together a defense in my head, but all that came out was a deflated, “But. . . .”

“All I ask is that if you have a problem with me, come to me,” he continued. “Don’t tell everyone how you feel. It’s not fair to them because they don’t have enough information to form their own opinions. Deal?”

I stared at him. I could tell he was tired of far more than just me. Perhaps he didn’t think he should be there either and he wanted more, too. Whatever that “more” was, perhaps

fighting so much for so little reminded him that he was not there yet.

“Deal?” He reached out his hand for me to shake it.

I did, and everything stopped. My manager was a real person now, and the consequences of my behavior were just as real.

So, that’s why Darla felt so real to my class. Because just a few years before, I was Darla.

## **Purposeful Storytelling**

I told my class that I was making this uncomfortable confession because I wanted them to resist the desire to even the score. Darla is afraid and does not know how to manage her feelings about it. I asked them to remember a time when they feared loss or being invisible or irrelevant. What did they do about it? Firing someone from a large organization for having a “nasty attitude” is rarely a viable strategy. The only real option left is to confront the problem head-on. If you ignore it or try to get rid of it, it will only grow. Fear is contagious, and it will spread. There is no need to tiptoe around Darla’s feelings, but I told them they have a responsibility to the company, Darla, their teams, and their own well-being to spend more time considering ways to not only manage the situation, but improve it. Problems do not just melt away. You either fix them or get crushed under their weight.

My intent was to encourage feelings of empathy, but looking back I think I also answered their unspoken question: How do you solve a problem like Darla? You empathize with her and then tackle the issue directly. That looks different for everyone. My manager at the copy center was fed up and confronted me, but there could have been other ways to deal with the situation. That is part of the ambiguity that comes with a manager’s responsibility. You do not know how these situations will turn out, but confronting them is the only way to gain some measure of control over the outcome. Letting it fester and potentially spread does a disservice to the problem employee and the rest of the team.

Telling my story was scary and I worried the participants would lose respect for me. That is not what happened. By the second day, people were confessing their own insecurities about being a good manager. One person who had Darla's case study—and had been the most outspoken about Darla's antics—admitted that she thought employees who constantly tested her made her look weak, which was a threat to her career and livelihood. She acknowledged that her anger toward Darla was really about her fear that she was an ineffective leader.

## Facilitating With Story

That day, I thought I had nothing to offer because I had no management experience. But I knew that what lurked behind the participants' frustrations were fear, anger, and insecurity—emotions that served as the basis for many of my stories. That is the power of storytelling. You can cut through the content to get to the core of the problem, which is often driven by emotion. This is why facilitators naturally gravitate toward storytelling as a way to connect real-life experiences—and real people—to the content. I still see that course as my instructional design debut, but it was also when I learned the true role of the facilitator and how storytelling can be used as a strategy to do the job well.

You cannot talk about using storytelling to facilitate learning without talking about the art of facilitation itself. When most of the learning and development field's efforts are focused on performance support and online learning, it is easy to lose sight of the facilitator's purpose. We are often given courses (or design them ourselves), along with a directive to take that content and transfer it into people's brains. Ideally, the course we receive is designed to support a learning experience that will help the learner transform knowledge into performance—a performance that will help an organization reach its goals. Facilitators are supposed to guide participants through that learning experience.

"Guide" is a good description of what facilitators do. We are leading participants toward a specific destination, but we recognize that the goal is to help them identify and reach their individual goals—ones that may differ from what we originally planned. Where learners ultimately arrive

depends on where they begin and their incentive to adopt new behaviors. Facilitators know the limits of their influence over the outcomes. Janis Chan (2010) writes in *Training Fundamentals: Pfeiffer Essential Guides to Training Basics*: “What trainers sometimes do not realize is that they are not responsible for participants’ learning. Participants are responsible for their own learning. The trainer is a guide who is responsible for creating and maintaining an environment in which people are able to learn.”

Understanding the facilitator’s influence and learning how to use it is essentially mastering the job, which takes time, practice, and study. Practitioners of facilitation learn early that the role is more than a combination of subject matter expertise and public-speaking skills. Yes, those skills are essential, but facilitation also requires empathy and vulnerability, along with the ability to take in information, process it, connect it to course content and previous learner comments, and—and this is mandatory—encourage participants to connect with you as a person. The story I told about being a jerk to my manager probably would have been less successful if I had not built rapport with the participants first. And I would not have felt comfortable being vulnerable in front of them if I did not know that the relationship was already there.

As guides, we help learners make connections, which is at the heart of teaching and learning—a course is simply a series of concepts and tasks connected in ways that are not always obvious. Learners must make connections for themselves between what they are learning and their own experiences. Perhaps through the activities in the course’s design, facilitators are fostering connections among the learners so that they can learn from one another as they go through the experience together.

What is an effective way to demonstrate empathy and vulnerability while helping learners make connections? Storytelling! It’s one of the oldest teaching devices and remains one of the most effective.

The art of storytelling is a formula that can be practiced and mastered. There is a difference, however, between people who tell stories, regardless of how well they have mastered the formula, and a storyteller. Anyone can tell a story. But to be a storyteller, mastering the formula is not enough. Punchlines are not enough. Recognition is not enough. Telling a recog-

nizable story about a challenge you faced on the job is not as useful if you neglect to dig deeper and move beyond what happened to get to how the incident changed you. While my story was about how I treated my manager and whether my participants recognized that experience, the story's purpose was my realization about why I behaved the way I did and the insight that realization provided.

## **A Story Teller Versus a Storyteller**

Facilitation is not simply about connecting; it is about connecting in the service of change. You may not have considered why an event occurred and what you gained, or lost, as a result. But the desire to reflect on what you have experienced, and then to search for a meaning that can be used to elicit a change in someone else, is the difference between a person who tells stories and a storyteller.

Facilitators who know that the joy of teaching comes with its challenges—the frustration of being face-to-face with learner apathy and resistance, thinking on your feet even when they hurt, working out loud for eight straight hours every day—know that telling stories is not enough. You must select and shape stories that connect and facilitate change. And to get these stories, you must be willing find them and let them find you. You must mine your experiences for meaning and be open to laying what you find bare in front of strangers at a moment's notice. I did not intend to tell my copy center story that day, but I had long ago processed what it meant to me personally and how it influenced my relationships with other managers. I saw the connection between what I learned and who I am today. To facilitate connections, you must first make connections yourself. You need to be a storyteller.

Being a storyteller is a way of life—it is a way of experiencing the world, shaping what you see, and reporting back through the lens of your own context. That storyteller is already inside you; it has been, and will continue, evolving over time. You help that process by knowing how to select, structure, shape, and tell stories that have the greatest capability of facilitating connections and change for listeners.

## About This Book

This book is about using storytelling as a facilitation strategy to help course participants make connections to content, ideas, and the people around them through their own experiences. Part 1 makes the case for how stories facilitate learning. It is about those stories that changed both the person who lived them and the person who heard them. We cover the basics of story structure and its importance. Some see storytelling as extemporaneous chats told from memory, but stories are far more likely to be understood and fulfill your intentions if they are purposely shaped with structure. Part 2 focuses on the four characteristics of stories that are most useful for facilitating learning. We will see what each characteristic looks like in practice. You can use these characteristics like a checklist for selecting stories to use when facilitating.

The story itself is nothing without a delivery that helps fulfill your intention. Part 3 is about delivering the stories you have selected and shaped. We will explore the behaviors you can practice as you strengthen the storyteller you already are.

I hope that after reading this book, you will determine that all the rifling through memories and re-examining old victories and failures is worth it. My wish is that you will stop saying you are bad at telling stories and focus on the fact that what you've learned from your experiences is valuable to you and others. While this can be emotional work, I believe that you are patient enough to go through the intellectual exercise of strategically selecting and shaping your stories. I hope that after all the work you put into getting the story right, you deliver it in a manner that enhances the story's power. It all leads to strengthening the natural storyteller inside yourself. Let's go!

## PART 1

# How Stories Facilitate Learning



Think about the last great story you liked. What did you like about it? Was it unusual? Perhaps it triggered unexpected emotions or brought back memories long forgotten. Now, think about a story that you enjoyed listening to—one where you actually enjoyed the experience of the storyteller bringing the story to life. And has there ever been a story that stayed with you? I do not mean one that you remember. I mean one that stuck to you. You may not have liked the story, and yet it haunted you. You have repeated it so often that people stopped bothering to tell you that you have told them already. It is someone else's story, but the experience of hearing it belongs to you.

There are stories that you liked, stories you enjoyed hearing, and stories you will never forget. But there is a fourth category—stories about change that also change you. Sometimes they are rich, layered, and compelling stories that force your eyes open. They could also be brief—so



brief that they break through in a flash like lightning—but are so powerful that they linger long after the strike.

Back when I worked in technical support, I had a co-worker who kept to herself. She had a strong Chinese accent and struggled to communicate in English, which I assumed contributed to her brevity. Once we were in the office alone together, and she asked me if I traveled. I told her I did not like to travel. Back in my late 20s, my philosophy was everything I need to see, I can watch on PBS. She smiled and said:

“I did not like to travel, and my husband was always wanting to go and see things. Finally, I said yes and then we went to the mountains in Washington and my . . . um. . .”

She put her hand on her chest and took a quick breath. “It was so beautiful, my heart . . . opened up.”

Her story was perfect. It had a challenge to overcome and a change in the protagonist—both necessary ingredients. Most of all, it was simple and honest. Before that moment I had seen travel as just going places and looking at things. But her story changed my mind, and then my mind changed me. She showed me that the joy of travel was in the experience.

Part 1 is about those stories that change both the person who lived it and the person who heard it. They are stories that facilitate learning and, ultimately, change.

# 1

## The Story



Do you think you would recognize a story if you heard one? You would be forgiven if you believed that a simple retelling of events was a story. However, it is more than that. Wade Jackson (2011), in his book *Stories at Work*, defines a story as “a sequence of events that progress towards an ending where someone or something has undergone change.” In her book *Wired for Story: The Writer’s Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers From the Very First Sentence*, Lisa Cron (2012) writes: “A story is how what happens affects someone who is trying to achieve what turns out to be a difficult goal, and how he or she changes as a result.”

Both definitions, and others like them, share two terms: *events* and *change*. Unearthing the relevant events requires that you step back and look at the larger picture, while pinpointing the change forces you to look closer and dig deeper.

### **Something Needs to Happen**

A story is a set of connected events, each caused or influenced by the one that came before it. The causal relationships among the events add a forward momentum to the story, which is the secret to compelling the listener to hang on. These connected events lead to a change, which is

typically the point of the story, but the change needs to be earned for the listener to get invested.

How is it possible for someone to tell a story where nothing happens? The person telling the story may get stuck in details, or they cannot or have not taken a step back to acknowledge the full sequence of events and reflected on their origins, connections, and influences. For instance, a colleague once told me that she taught a class where a participant read a novel throughout the entire morning, completely ignoring her and the rest of the participants. The participant was not discreet—he held the book up, loudly turned pages, and even reacted to what he was reading. I thought, this is going to be a good story, and I couldn’t wait to hear more. Then, she stopped talking.

“Well, what did you do?” I asked.

“About him?”

“Yes. Did you call him out? How did you make him stop?”

“I didn’t,” she said, like the thought had just occurred to her.

While this may have seemed like a story to her, it was not. It was just a sequence of events. So, how do we transform a sequence of events into a story? Start by identifying the point you want to make with the story you are fleshing out. In my friend’s case, the point of the story could be the reason he was reading the book or, considering she may never know the reason, it could have focused on how facilitators should manage the situation. In fact, it could be used to facilitate learning a variety of topics—including train-the-trainer, facilitation, and presentation skills courses. You could also use it for new supervisors who need to learn how to lead and influence in the face of resistance. Picking a point is a key part of framing your intent, which will then influence which events to include.

Once you know what point you are focusing on, you can move on to the events you know and do not know about. Put yourself in her place in the front of that room. I should mention that the book incident took place in the early 2000s, before people multitasked with mobile phones and laptops. Since the rise of the smartphone, I have grown immune to

being ignored by a few participants while public speaking, but back then, a person reading a book so brazenly was both unheard of and frankly, bizarre. But while his behavior certainly was not nice and was unusual, who cares? After getting over his unmitigated gall, you'll need to identify more events to make a story out of it. This did not happen in a vacuum. The only way to map out the events that led to a certain point is to look at the larger picture.

Unearthing long-past events may be a challenge. You may not remember them accurately or even at all. Perhaps you remember the events, but not the order or the connections among them. There are contexts in which listing specific events does not matter, but when it does, timelining is a great way to identify event details, their connections, and their meanings.

## **What Happened? Timelining Key Events**

Timelining is a strategy for identifying the events before and after the key event, which is the point of the story. This exercise is designed to help you identify the story's key event and create a timeline of other events that may have come before or after it. The implication is that the events that preceded the key event contributed to its occurrence, and the events that came after it were directly or indirectly caused by it. So, you are specifically looking for events that will support your intention and the causal relationships among them. To determine whether an event will work, you must consider its significance.

Begin timelining by hand drawing a line that represents the story (Figure 1-1). Then identify the key event, which is probably the part that makes you remember the story so well. It is usually the point on which the rest of the story depends. Writers may call it the climax, which is part of the pyramid-shaped, dramatic structure model. Starting on the left, you begin with the exposition, followed by rising tension, which is represented by the left wall of the pyramid. The rising tension leads to the narrative's climax, which sits atop the pyramid and is where dramatic tension is at its highest point. After the climax, we move down the right side of the pyramid with falling tension, ending with the resolution. Writers have challenged,

reimagined, and outright defied this structure over time (for example, leading with the climax, having no resolution, and so forth), but it is a helpful model to consider when timelining story events. We will use the pyramid structure as an influence here and begin by placing the key event near the middle of the timeline.

Figure 1-1. How to Begin Timelining

---

*Story*



Now, starting with the key event, search your memory and find as many events that preceded the key event as possible. Remember, you are looking for events that both support your intention and have a causal relationship with the key event. It is easier to begin with events that you remember happening immediately before the key event and work backward through time. We call these leading events because they are events that led to the key event.

Once you are confident that you've identified all the leading events, move on to the consequential events. These are the events that occurred as a result of the key event (and all the events that led up to the key event). It is important to stay focused on your intent as you identify consequential events. Avoid overreaching by attributing the cause of circumstantial incidents to the key event. Also, concentrate on what happened as opposed to what did not happen. It is often impossible to say that an event did not occur because of something else. For example, saying, "And because of that one interaction, my boss promoted me to manager," is more believable than, "And because of that one interaction, my boss did not promote me to manager." The first is the inspirational ending we are used to, which may give your assumption credibility. The second is less credible, and may make people wonder whether you are leaving out another reason you did not get promoted.

An essential part of timelining is self-questioning, which helps you remember leading and consequential events and consider the connections among them. There are no specific questions to ask, but the types of questions fall into three categories:

- sequence and connections
- place and time
- insight.

For every event that meets your criteria, draw a vertical line in the appropriate place on the timeline (Figure 1-2).

Figure 1-2. Adding Events to the Timeline



What follows is an example of a timelining exercise. I'll start by explaining my intention for the story because, as I mentioned earlier, intention fuels the timelining process.

## The Night Emails

**Intention:** The goal of the story is to warn a group of managers in a supervisory class about the possible consequences of off-hour communication with their direct reports and to encourage the managers to cease or minimize the practice.

**What I remember:** I managed a team of five people. The days were busy, so I sent most of my emails at night. It seemed like, no matter when I sent an email, I would get an immediate response. I assumed they were just at their computers or on their BlackBerries and, like me, thought they would get a head start on the next workday by answering emails immediately. During a meeting, I told my manager that I had received some information the night before from one of my direct reports. He told me that I should not email my employees in the evening because they may

feel obligated to answer me back immediately. He told me to consider waiting until the next day or using Outlook's delay send feature. I thought his request was silly because I never told my team when to reply. They were making the choice to do so. I also did not take him seriously because he sent me emails all night long. I stopped sending emails at night for a little while, but soon started again.

The description of this initial memory is how stories may sound when they are only a sequence of events with no insight, agency, or acknowledged change in the protagonist. Timelining helps fill in the blanks with events, and then connecting those events leads to deeper reflection.

## Timelining Questions

### Key Event: Meeting With My Manager

- **Sequence and connections**

- What happened immediately before the meeting? *I don't remember.*
- What instigated the meeting? *I do recall that we were in the midst of a large, stressful project. I imagine the meeting was a "check-in" meeting and not specifically about the emails.*
- What happened after the meeting? *I do not remember, but if I were to guess, I probably went to a co-worker's desk to complain about my manager's request. And I am sure I focused on the fact that he sent me emails at night despite him telling me not to send them.*

- **Place and time**

- Where was the meeting held? *It was on-site in a conference room.*
- How long had he been your manager prior to this incident? *I worked there for a little over a year, and I believe this happened about halfway through my tenure.*

- **Insight**

- How did you feel about your relationship with your manager? *We had a tense relationship and struggled to communicate with each other effectively.*



- How did you feel about your team? *I was new to managing a team of that size, so I was learning as I went along. I liked everyone, but I was unsure about how they felt about me.*
- Why did you really send emails at night? *Honestly, I did not want the answers to come back to me immediately. I wanted the problems off my plate for a while. I was initially surprised to receive replies—it was the first job I'd had where people were sending and answering emails at night. It was frustrating when I received immediate answers because I would have to think about the problem again before I went to bed.*
- How did you feel (before and after the meeting) about your boss sending you emails at night? *Before the meeting, it bothered me, but it seemed to be part of the culture. After the meeting, the hypocrisy bothered me even more.*
- The focus right now seems to be on his hypocrisy. Does that theme serve your intent? *No. I suppose the point I could focus on is the importance of ensuring that you model the behaviors you want to see in your staff, but that is a story for another day. I want to get back to my own behavior.*
- Take a further step back and put the focus on yourself as a manager who is now teaching other managers. Did the conversation with your manager give you any insight into the consequences of off-hours communication? *I did not want to admit it then, but my manager was right. I know he was right because I answered every email he sent me at night. He did not ask me to reply, but I felt obligated to anyway. It didn't matter that he was doing what he told me not to do—I was blinded by my negative thoughts toward him. What mattered was that I did not want to send my staff into a tailspin at the end of the evening. I knew the consequences of my choices because I was living them, and I did not want my team to feel like I did.*

I will stop there. Taking a closer look at a simple story about emailing my staff at night turned into an exploration of my own insecurities as a

new manager. Additional events and new insights appeared because of the questioning process. Now, let's walk through the timeline I constructed for this story.

## Constructing the Timeline

### Leading events:

1. I am hired as a new manager at a company where off-hours communication seems like the norm, a concept that was new to me; as a result. . . .
2. I begin sending emails to my staff at night and, honestly, I was fine doing this because I did not want immediate replies. I was still new and unsure of myself and the decisions I was making; as a result. . . .
3. When I received a response to an email I sent to an employee late at night, I mentioned it to my manager during our meeting; as a result. . . .

### Key event:

4. My manager told me that I was potentially causing anxiety within my team, and that I should consider stopping the behavior; as a result. . . .

### Consequential events:

5. I was angry with my manager because he sent me emails at night, too. I chose to focus on his hypocrisy instead of changing my behavior; as a result. . . .
6. Every time he sent me an email at night, my focus on his behavior made me realize the impact the nightly emails had on me; as a result. . . .
7. I had to admit to myself that my emails were having the same effect on my team that my manager's emails were having on me.

By taking a few steps back and looking at the bigger picture using timelining, I was able to piece together a more robust story with the events that led up to the key event and were then caused by it. The timeline sets you up nicely for the other element that's included in most definitions of *story*: Something or someone must change.

## What Is “Change”?

To better understand the role of events and change in stories, look to the cinema. I am a movie buff. Not the type with an encyclopedic memory of titles, dates, and lines—but I love how movies expand my perception and knowledge of human behavior and what drives it.

An essential element of every movie is the protagonist’s character arc, which maps a character’s journey through a film. Character arcs are usually described using the events in a character’s journey and the changes that come as a result of those events. Many films are based on a character’s journey: good girl gone bad, the prodigal son returns, road movie as metaphor for self-discovery—you get the idea. Change is often the central plot point of classic horror films, whether it is the physical transformation from man to monster or the spiritual transformation from monster to man. And change is not just for fiction. Many successful documentaries feature people who were changed by events—or who forced the world around them to change instead. Movies attempt to investigate, reveal, and document change and wrap it into a narrative for consumption.

But remember, we are not just talking about change for change’s sake. Writers talk about characters “earning” a change. At the end of my story about the night emails, I could have simply said, “And after my manager told me to stop writing emails at night, I stopped and was a changed woman.” Perhaps, but that is not helpful to anyone but me. What is helpful is seeing the change in my choices over time, or rather, to see me earning the change. It is that process, rather than the change itself, that learners connect with. Your experience may instruct learners on how to make the same change.

Turning back to film as an example, consider the movie montage. The boxer can’t just win a fight. We have to witness him earning it. The stronger we relate to the character, the more willing we are to put ourselves in his shoes. You, too, can transform your body, win back your wife, and prepare to beat the world heavyweight champion in five minutes! Suspension of disbelief aside, the same principle that applies to audiences watching *Rocky* applies to a new manager hearing your story about how you learned the importance of giving feedback the hard way. That is how change functions in a story, and it is one reason that stories are such great

facilitation tools. A sequence of events without a change can be a story, but it won't be a particularly interesting, compelling, or motivating one. You need to find the change.

## Finding the Change

Finding *events* forces you to step back and look at the larger picture, while finding a *change* forces you to look closer and dig deeper. It is easy to see storytelling as a series of events, because telling the story is the only visible manifestation of a long and complicated process. And it is one of the easiest steps. The hard part is experiencing the events, allocating space and time (literally and figuratively) to gain perspective on them, shaping them into a story, and knowing when and how to tell it.

Doug Stevenson is a strategic business storyteller who has trained professionals in storytelling for years. In his book, *Doug Stevenson's Story Theater Method: Strategic Storytelling in Business* (2011), he writes that “the speakers and storytellers who make the most enduring impact on their audiences have one thing in common: they possess insight—the ability to look inside and find a profound truth. They see what everyone sees and choose to go deeper.”

Some see little value in going deeper to explore seemingly meaningless occurrences, and even fewer people want to revisit and examine unpleasant events. I do not blame my colleague for not wanting to further examine why a participant read a book in her class while she was talking, let alone explore its deeper meaning. It is probably better for her to move beyond that experience and accept that whatever happened had nothing to do with her. It is the best way to protect yourself. She would probably classify what happened as just one of those “toss-away” anecdotes, which are retellings of memories about inconsequential events. And yet, the only reason I knew about the book incident was because she told me about it. And she could only tell me about it because she remembered it. Because you are more likely to remember incidents that affected you in some way, his actions may have been more consequential than she realized. You're not going to vividly remember and repeat events that are really “no big deal.”

The toss-away stories that we remember carry more weight than we think, and the keys to why we react the way we do to certain stimuli could be locked away inside them. Storytellers are committed to searching their pasts for changes and their causes. But it takes time and experience to know when going too deep is pointless. Indeed, there is a point of diminishing returns when you go so deep into the tangled roots that you lose perspective on what is connected. That's why so much of storytelling depends on making direct connections between your intent and what is included in the story. Events, although open for interpretation, are real—they can be witnessed, documented, and verified. Therefore, it's easier to build a formula for finding them, one that can be applied to different contexts. Change, however, is more elusive—it may not be real at all. If it's not witnessed by anyone other than the person doing the changing, verification is almost impossible, and it's difficult to apply a strategy or formula to it. I only know of one way: Look for the truth.

### **Banging on the Lid**

Do you consider the change you are looking for and then find the story that fits? Or, do you find the story and then find the change that occurred because of it? The answer is both—do not make it harder than it is. If an incident that happened years ago stands out in your memory, then it may have some significance. Significant events tend to have a lingering impact on our lives, which is typically followed by a change in deed or perception. But you will only see it if you are willing to see what is true about the person you were before and after the experience. And you will only bring out that inner storyteller once you are willing to talk about it.

We tend to stuff our toss-away stories into jars and store them away in our memories. We often forget they are there, but we can feel their weight and are keenly aware of the space they occupy. Over time, as vague memories that once seemed inconsequential become useful, the jar's now corroded lid becomes harder to twist off. You may have to bang on the lid of the jar to get to what is inside. In lieu of a strategic formula to uncover the truth about how an incident changed you, I suggest you do just that: Bang on that lid with questions until the lid opens up.

Using “The Night Emails” story as an example, here are some of the questions I used to get started thinking:

- What did I feel about my behavior after my discussion with my manager?
- How does that differ from how I felt before?
- Was the change out of character for me? Was I surprised by it?
- What does how I felt before and after the discussion say about me as a manager? What does it say about me as a person?
- Did the change benefit me? Did it benefit anyone else?

Each question moves you closer to what’s inside the jar: What is really at the core of those stories? What does it reveal about what’s true for me and others? In other words, if you are looking for stories, follow the truth.

## **Following the Truth to the Story**

This book is not about my stories. I use them as examples of how I have transformed the events that have shaped my life and career into facilitation tools. You may be wondering how to find interesting and applicable stories from your life. What if you are a young professional just starting your career and don’t think any of your stories would provide any insight to a person 10 years your senior? What if you are close to retirement, but think your experiences from years ago aren’t relatable to today’s young professionals? What if you believe your career and life have been uneventful, and so your stories are boring? While there is no good answer for any of these questions, my advice is to follow the truth—it always leads to a story.

When I studied writing, we talked about *Truth* with a “big T” and *truth* with a “small t.” The implication is that “big T” truths are objectively true—the sky is blue and the grass is green. “Small t” truths are true for you because you experienced them, but are subjective in that they may not be true for everyone else. “Small t” truths are not only opinions. Opinions are views or judgments that are not necessarily based on fact or knowledge. “Small t” truths are factual experiences you have been through, and are consequently influenced and filtered by your worldview. The best stories are a balance of “Ts” and “ts.” Now, where do you find them?

## Where Do Stories Come From?

All your stories will come from one of two places: events or relationships (Stevenson 2011). Wade Jackson, in his 2011 book *Stories at Work*, categorizes four story sources—your professional career, the people in your life, the events in your life, and your values—and lists the questions needed to bang on that lid. I’ve summarized them here and included a few comments of my own:

1. **Reflect on your professional career:** The experiences you enjoyed the most and the least, mistakes you made and what you learned from them, your major professional accomplishments, who helped or hurt your career, and your major turning points and their effect.
2. **Reflect on people in your life:** People who had a positive impact on you throughout your life (for example, teachers, friends, co-workers, managers, mentors, and mentees), people you admire and why, people who triggered emotions (such as love, envy, hate, and fear), and people who taught you something about yourself.
3. **Reflect on events in your life:** Times when you overcame great odds, your proudest achievements, events that triggered happiness or fear (or both), trips you’ve taken, childhood memories and what you learned from them, or memorable events while engaging in hobbies or other interests.
4. **Reflect on your values:** Times when your values were reinforced or compromised, times when you’ve experienced great kindness (or extended it), times when you learned to trust (or not to), times when you felt guilty about what you did or didn’t do.

A way to find stories is to identify the origin of the change your story describes. The classic model for the origin story is the superhero narrative, which hinges on transformation and will serve the same purpose as the stories you are looking for. Origin stories provide a guideline for story selection because they tell the legend of how you became who you are today. We are all shaped by our experiences, and our stories (and scars) are the



proof that we not only triumphed, but also learned and grew from them. Just don't forget to balance objective truths with your subjective ones.

## **Wrap-Up: The Story on Stories**

A story has two key components: events and change. Begin with identifying the point of the story and then identify the key event that made the point possible. Perhaps the key event is meeting with someone who eventually led to you experiencing a life-changing revelation—in that case, the revelation that is the point of your story. After the key event, use timelineing to flesh out your story by identifying the events that led to the key event and the ones that were caused by that event.

Timelineing helps you find events by encouraging you to question what you remember, and to think more deeply about how each step may have led to the one that followed. Select events for the timeline by identifying the connections between them. In other words, only include events that have a causal relationship. Identifying these connected events and how they ultimately led to a revelation or change are the first steps in transforming an ordinary sequence of events into a story that may help facilitate the type of performance you are looking for.

# About the Author



Hadiya Nuriddin is the owner for Focus Learning Solutions, a learning design and development provider for both corporate and academic organizations. Hadiya has decades of experience in designing, developing, and delivering both technical and professional development courses and she specializes in creating effective, engaging, and interactive online learning solutions. When she is not working with clients, she consults with other self-employed L&D professionals to help them start and build their own businesses. She has a master's degree in both education (MEd) and writing and publishing (MA). She is also a Certified Professional in Learning and Performance (CPLP).

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