DIGITAL STORYTELLING COOKBOOK

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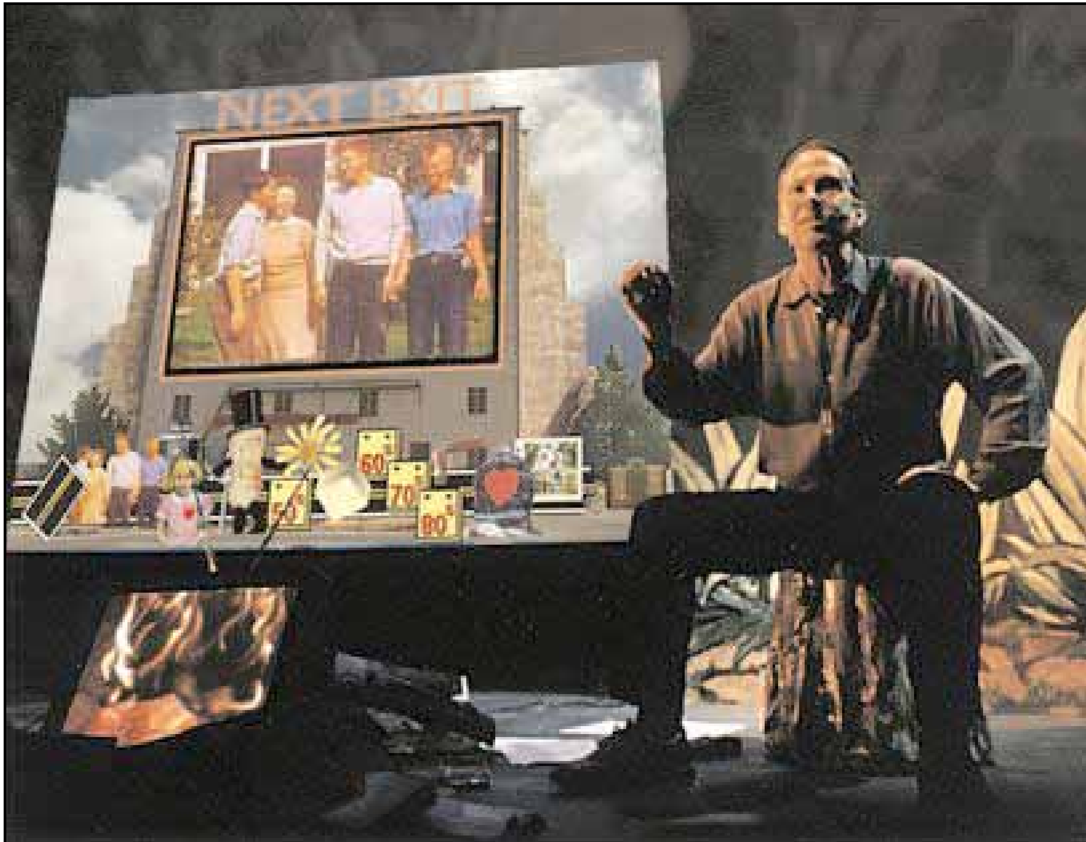


Our work in Digital Storytelling was inspired by the efforts of the late Dana W. Atchley.
His performance *Next Exit*, and the stories he shared, continue
to inspire others to honor their lives.

Find out more about Dana Atchley's work at *nextexit.com*.

Preface

"*Stories move in circles. They don't move in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles. There are stories inside stories and stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is getting lost. And when you're lost, you start to look around and listen.*"

—Corey Fischer, Albert Greenberg, and Naomi Newman
A Travelling Jewish Theatre from *Coming from a Great Distance*
Excerpted from *Writing for Your Life* by Deena Metzger

When I worked in theater, the first show at my venue was a show by John O'Neal, the legendary founder of the Free Southern Theater.

He was doing one of his Junebug Jabbo Jones stories, recounting the events of the rural south and the civil rights movement. Ten years later to the week, John O'Neal was the last performer before I turned my theater over to new managers, performing with Naomi Newman in *Crossing the Broken Bridge*, a story about African-American and Jewish American relations.

These bookends of my professional theater experience say a great deal about the role story and ancient root cultures played in forming my attitude about the storytelling arts in our civic life. In the tremendous oral traditions of African and Jewish cultures, there is an assessment of storymaking and telling that is synonymous with the value of life itself. Story is learning, celebrating, healing, and remembering. Each part of the life process necessitates it. Failure to make story honor these passages threatens the consciousness of communal identity. Honoring a life event with the sacrament of story is a profound spiritual value for these cultures. It enriches the individual, emotional and cultural development, and perhaps ultimately, the more mysterious development of their soul.

The circles of stories passing through the journey of my life as a digital storytelling facilitator have brought me back to this. As we are made of water, bone, and biochemistry, we are made of stories. The students that share their stories in our circles recognize a metamorphosis of sorts, a changing, that makes them feel different about their lives, their identities.

In this cookbook, we share with you our storytelling approach. We hope you will find it inspiring as well as useful.

Our cookbook has just one recipe, *Momnotmom* by Thenmozhi Soundararajan. To view the completed piece, visit us on-line at *www.storycenter.org*.

The rest of this cookbook will break this digital story down into a recipe with ingredients, that will help you to prepare it all again. We'll talk more about stories in gener-al too, so you can take this recipe and adapt it to your own tastes. We encourage you to make the digital story you're hungry for.

— Joe Lambert, Director
Center for Digital Storytelling

1 Stories in Our Lives

A story can be as short as explaining why you bought your first car or house, or as long as *War and Peace*. Your own desires in life, the kinds of struggles you have faced, and most importantly, the number and depth of realizations you have taken from your experience all shape your natural abilities as an effective storyteller. Translating those realizations into stories in the form of essays, memoirs, autobiographies, short stories, novels, plays, screenplays, or multimedia scripts, is mainly about time. You need time to put the raw material before you, time to learn procedures and approaches for crafting the story, and time to listen to the feedback and improve upon your efforts.

For some, conceiving an idea for a story is an easy process, while for others it is the beginning of a crisis. The issue of how we get from our conversational use of story to crafting a work that stands on its own falls more into the category of a general creative process. Why and how do we remember stories? What affects our ability to retain stories? How do we develop our own sense of voice and story? And what kinds of stories from our lives are likely to work as multimedia stories?

That Reminds Me of a Story

Cultural anthropologist Gregory Bateson was asked in the 1950s if he believed that computer-based artificial intelligence was possible. He responded that he did not know, but that he believed when you would ask a computer a yes-or-no question and it responded with “that reminds me of a story,” you would be close.

Our understanding of how story is at the core of human activity has been a subject of fascination for academics and experts in the computer age. Educational and artificial intelligence theorist Roger Schank has argued in the last decade that the road to understanding human intelligence, and thus the road to artificial intelligence construction, is built on story. In Schank’s 1992 book, *Tell Me a Story*, he suggests that the cyclical process of developing increasingly complex levels of stories that we apply in increasingly sophisticated ways to specific situations is one way to map the human cognitive development process. Stories are the large and small instruments of meaning and explanation that we store in our memories.

So why is it that when many of us are asked to construct a story as a formal presentation to illustrate an idea, we go blank? We informally tell stories all the time, but the conscious construction of story calls up mental blocks. Here are three possible reasons:

Overloaded Memory Bank

From the standpoint of cognitive theory, the problem is about being overwhelmed by stories that we can’t process. Our minds construct a sense of memory immediately after being part of an experience or hearing a story, and unless we have a dramatic experience, or have a particular reason to constantly recite the story of the experience, it slowly diminishes in our memory. Retrieval of a given story or experience becomes more difficult the farther away we are in time from the original story or event.

In oral culture, we humans learned to retain stories as epigrams, or little tales that had a meaningful proverb at the end. The constant repetition of epigrammatic tales gave us a stock supply of references to put to appropriate use, like the hundreds of cowboy sayings I grew up with in Texas, to apply to a wide range of situations. In our current culture, many of us have not developed an epigrammatic learning equivalent to these processes.

At the same time, we are bombarded with millions of non-digestible and non-memorable story fragments every time we pick up a phone, bump into a friend, watch TV, listen to the radio, read a book or a newspaper, or browse the Web. We simply cannot process every one of these encounters and turn them into epigrams, let alone recite and retain them, and so they become a jumble of fragments that actually inhibit our ability to construct a coherent story.

Only people who develop effective filtering, indexing, and repackaging tools in their minds can manage to successfully and consistently articulate meaning that reconstructs a coherent story. We think of the skilled professionals in any given field as having developed this process for their specialty. They can tell appropriate stories—the memory of cases for a trial lawyer, for example-based on having systematized a portion of their memories. But most skilled professionals have difficulty using examples outside of their respective fields, from their personal life or non-professional experience, but those who do are often described as storytellers.

This is one of the arguments for the lifelong Memory Box as a retrieval/filtering/construction system to assist us in this process. Images, videos, sounds, and other representations of events from our life can help us to reconstruct more complete memories and therefore expand the repertoire of story that we can put to use.

The Editor

Having worked in arts education settings, we are experienced with people telling us that they have no story to tell. Along with language arts educators and psychologists, we are aware that most of us carry around a little voice, an editor, that tells us that what we have to say is not entertaining or substantial enough to be heard. That editor is a composite figure of everyone in our lives who has diminished our sense of creative ability, from family members, to teachers, to employers, to society as a whole. We live in a culture where expert story-making is a highly valued and rewarded craft.

Once we fall behind in developing our natural storytelling abilities to their fullest extent, it takes a much longer commitment and concentration to reclaim those abilities. As adults, time spent in these creative endeavors is generally considered frivolous and marginal by our society, and so few pursue it. Those of us who have assisted people in trying to reclaim their voice know that it requires a tremendous sensitivity to successfully bring people to a point where they trust that the stories they do tell are vital, emotionally powerful, and unique. Were it not that we as human beings have a deep intuitive sense of the power of story, it's a wonder that we have a popular storytelling tradition at all.

The Good Consumer Habit

Our awareness of the residual impact of mass media has grown tremendously over the past thirty years. Media literacy experts have thoroughly documented that a prolonged exposure to mass media messages over time disintegrates our critical intelligence. The process is, in part, the effect of the over-stimulation we already mentioned. Yet, beyond the fact that we are immersed in too much TV and other media forms, it is the style in which these media, particularly advertising, present themselves that actually affects our sense of ourselves as storytellers. If I can get more attention for the kind of shoes I wear or the style of my hair at one-tenth the conscious effort of explaining what the heck is wrong or right about my life in a way that moves you, why not take the simpler route instead? Status and recognition, in our consumer culture, is an off-the-rack item.

Finding Your Story

For all of these reasons and quite a few others, a person's initial efforts at story-making can be frustrating. We have worked with several high-powered communicators who froze up like a deer in the headlights when it came time for them to construct an emotionally-compelling personal tale.

The starting point for overcoming a creative block is to start with a small idea. It is a natural tendency to want to make a novel or screenplay out of a portion of our life experiences, and to think in terms of getting all the details. But it is exactly that kind of scale that disables our memory. Our emphasis on using photographic imagery in our digital storytelling workshops facilitates the process of taking a potential story, picture-by-picture. Pedro Meyer, in creating his breathtakingly compelling *I Photograph to Remember* CD-ROM, recorded a narrative by simply setting up a tape recorder in his living room. He asked his publisher, Bob Stein, to sit beside him as he recorded his voice while he described each photograph to Bob. That was it. One take and it became the voice-over that was used for the CD-ROM. This process may work for your project.

Perhaps your project does not originate with visual material on hand. Take a look at our example interview questions in the next section for various kinds of short personal stories. Have someone interview you, then transcribe the words and see what they tell you about the story you are trying to conceive.

As you are putting together your raw material for your story, you are also working to build your narrative voice. Everyone has a unique style of expressing him or herself that can jump off the page or resonate in a storytelling presentation. Realizing your voice, and making it as rich and textured as you are as a person, takes time and practice.

The process of moving from a journalistic, technical, or official voice towards a more organic and natural voice is often difficult. It is as if we are trying to merge the two different parts of our brains: the analytical and the emotive. Most of us can't switch back and forth without getting at least slightly confused. The official voice is the voice of our expository writing class, our essays and term papers, or our formal memos and letters to our professional colleagues. We have been taught that this voice carries dispassionate authority, useful perhaps in avoiding misunderstandings, but absolutely deadly as a story.

Getting feedback also helps us identify our narrative voice. Reading material aloud to someone who we know well, and asking him or her to identify which part is true to our voice is a useful practice. Of course, crafting a narrative voice by moving away from clichés and redundancy requires pulling out the thesaurus to substitute common verbs and adjectives. But in the end, take your time and let the ideas and meanings sink in before you edit. If something feels overwhelmingly right, don't polish it too much. We have had lots of scripts that started out fresh and authentic, but by the time the authors and collaborators got through with it, it was filled with succinct and gorgeous-yet-characterless prose.

Interviewing

The following series of question sets for the "Interview" or "Self-Interview" process can assist in the development of different kinds of stories, but it is not meant to supplant a more direct scripting process if that is how you are accustomed to working. However, almost all of us can gain from having source material that appears from a less self–conscious response to a set of directed questions.

In recording your responses, you may find that you have sufficient material to make your voice-over. Cutting and rearranging your responses using digital audio editing software may be all that is required. If you take this route, keep in mind that you must take steps to ensure a good-quality recording.

Interviewing Techniques

You may find it easier to respond to these questions directly into a microphone in the privacy of your own home or office as opposed to a workshop space. If the prospect of talking to a recording device is off-putting (and it may be more likely to increase your self-consciousness than relax you), have someone interview you. This can be a friend, a spouse, relative, or co-worker. This process can be both fun and revealing, but requires that the interviewer commit to a few common-sense ideas.

Guidelines for the Interviewer

1) Study the questions so that you are not reading from the page, and feel free to ad lib. Being able to sustain eye contact assists the interviewee in relaxing and responding in a natural way.

2) Allow the interviewee to complete his or her thoughts. Unlike a radio or TV interviewer that is concerned with "dead air" in the conversation, give the interviewee all the time desired to think through and restate something that is a bit difficult to articulate. Interruptions can cause people to lose their train of thought or become self-aware and steer away from important, but perhaps emotionally difficult information. Let the interviewee tell you when he or she has finished a question before moving on to the next.

3) When appropriate, use your own intuition when asking questions to get more detailed responses. Often, a person's initial thoughts about a question only retrieves a broad outline of a memory. Feel free to request specifics or details that would clarify or expand upon a general response.

4) If the story is about information that is specifically painful or traumatic in the person's life, carefully assess how far you will allow the respondent to delve into these memories. In many situations where the interviewer is not a spouse or a loved one, you may cross into territory that is much better approached in a therapeutic environment with experienced guides or professionally trained advisors. We have come perilously close in interviews to taking people into an emotional state from which they cannot return at the session. This is embarrassing for the respondent, and an emotionally inconsiderate act on the part of the interviewer, as the interviewee may not have the therapeutic support to cope with these issues in the hours and days after the interview. Don't feel you need to hunt for emotionally charged material to make the interview effective. If it comes naturally and comfortably, so be it.

Finally, along with ensuring privacy in the interview, make sure everyone is comfortable: comfortable chairs, water at hand, and the microphone positioned so as not to disrupt ease of movement. (A lavaliere, or pin-on microphone, is the best).

Kinds of Personal Stories

There are all kinds of stories in our lives that we can develop into multimedia pieces. Here are a few sets of example questions for some of these stories. Adapting any of the question sets by integrating the existing sets, or developing a separate set, is encouraged.

The Story About Someone Important

Character Stories

How we love, are inspired by, want to recognize, and find meaning in our relationships are all aspects of our lives that are deeply important to us. Perhaps the majority of the stories created in our workshops are about a relationship, and in the best stories they tell us more about ourselves than the details of our own life story.

Memorial Stories

Honoring and remembering people who have passed is an essential part of the grieving process. These stories are often the most difficult and painful to produce, but the results can be the most powerful.

– What is, or had been, your relationship to this person?
– How would you describe this person (physical appearance, character, etc.)?
– Is there an event/incident that best captures their character?
– What about the person do/did you most enjoy?
– What about the person drives you crazy?
– What lesson did the person give to you that you feel is most important?
– If you had something to say to the person but they never had a chance to hear you say it, what would it be?

The Story About an Event in My Life

Adventure Stories

One of the reasons we travel is to break away from the normalcy of our lives and create new vivid memories. All of us who travel know that the experience is usually an invitation to challenge ourselves, to change our perspective about our lives, and to reassess meaning. We often return from these experiences with personal realizations, and the process of recounting our travel stories is as much about sharing those realizations as sharing the sense of beauty or interest in the place visited.

Strangely enough, while almost everyone tells good travel stories, it is often difficult to make an effective multimedia piece from these stories. We rarely think about constructing a story with our photographs or videos in advance of a trip. And we do not want to take ourselves out of the most exhilarating moments by taking out a camera and recording. Before your next trip, think about creating a story outline based on an idea prior to your visit, as well as what sorts of images, video, or sounds would be useful to establish the story.

Accomplishment Stories

Accomplishment stories are about achieving a goal, like graduating from school, landing a major contract, or being on the winning team in a sporting event. These stories easily fit into the desire–struggle–realization structure of a classic story. They also tend to be documented, so you might find it easy to construct a multimedia story. Televised sporting events have taken up the accomplishment story as a staple, and it might be helpful for you to carefully examine an "Olympic moment" to see how they balance the acts of establishing information, interviews, and voice-over.

– What was the event (time, place, incident, or series of incidents)?
– What was your relationship to the event?
– With whom did you experience this event?
– Was there a defining moment in the event?
– How did you feel during this event (fear, exhilaration, sharpened awareness, joy...)?
– What did the event teach you?
– How did this event change your life?

The Story About a Place in My Life

Up until this century, 90% of the world's population died within a ten-mile radius of the home where they were born and raised. While this now might be difficult for us to imagine, our sense of place is still the basis of many profound stories. One of the earliest interactive storytelling websites, *1,000 Rooms*, a German-based project, invited people to submit a single image of a room in their home and tell a story about their relationship with it. Hundreds of people responded with their own intimate stories. You may have a story about your current home, an ancestral home, a town, a park, a mountain or forest you love, a restaurant, store, or gathering place. Your insights into place give us insight about your sense of values and connection to community.

– How would you describe the place?
– With whom did you share this place?
– What general experiences do you relate to this place?
– Was there a defining experience at the place?
– What lessons about yourself do you draw from your relationship to this place?
– If you have returned to this place, how has it changed?

The Story About What I Do

For many people with professional careers, a life story is shaped by their job. Author and oral historian, Studs Terkel, collected a series of interviews in his book, *Working*, to demonstrate that we all have unique ways of perceiving and valuing what we do. And while jobs help to give some people a sense of identity, people also refer to their hobbies or social-commitments when thinking about who they are.

A good story often comes from looking at the familiar in a new way and with a new meaning. The details of the tasks, the culture of the characters that inhabit our work-place, or our spiritual or philosophical relationship to our work or avocation can lead us into many stories.

– What is your profession or ongoing interest?
– What experiences, interests, and/or knowledge in your previous life prepared you for this activity?
– Was there an initial event that most affected your decision to pursue this interest?
– Who influenced or assisted you in shaping your career, interest, or skill in this area?
– How has your profession or interest affected your life as a whole (family, friends, where you live)?
– What has been the highlight of your vocation?

Other Personal Stories

Recovery Stories

Sharing the experience of overcoming a great challenge in life is a fundamental archetype in human story making. If you can transmit the range of experience from descent, to crisis, to realization, then you can always move an audience.

Love Stories

Romance, partnership, familial or fraternal love all naturally lend themselves to the desire-struggle-realization formula. We all want to know how someone met their partner, what it was like when the baby was born, or what our relationship is with our siblings and parents. We constantly test other people’s experiences in these fundamental relationships to affirm our own. These are also stories that tend to have plenty of existing documentation.

Discovery Stories

The process of learning is a rich field to mine for stories. The detective in us gets great pleasure in illustrating how we uncovered the facts to get at a truth, whether it is in fixing a broken bicycle or developing a new product.

As you decide what story would best serve your needs, keep in mind that these categories are in no way sacrosanct, and they intersect in a number of ways. It is also probable that you will come up with your own additional categories or other ways of dissecting the stories in your mind.

Don't Just Sit There…

One of the hardest, but most important thing to do is get started. Because many of these stories ask us to reveal things about ourselves that make us feel vulnerable, putting together a story can be a procrastinator's paradise. Just get up, start answering questions on a tape recorder, write things down, gather up the photos, review your videos, and bounce your ideas off of your friends and family.

Life is full of stories, but you may not have a lifetime to capture them as movies, so, go for it!

2 Seven Steps of Digital Storytelling

During the first few years of our workshops, we would discuss with participants what made a story a digital story, and what made a digital story a good digital story. We came up with seven elements that outlined the fundamentals of digital storytelling and discovered that formally presenting them at the beginning of workshops greatly improved the process and the stories told.

Our emphasis over the years has been to help storytellers find the story they want or need to tell, and then help them clearly define that story in the form of solidly written script. For many storytellers, this process of clarification has proven to be a transformative experience, and for us, a truly rewarding journey. We now look forward to further refining this process and evolving the genre. And as we hold onto our original commitment to help storytellers sculpt a focused piece of personal writing, we will discuss what makes a story a digital story, and what makes a digital story a good digital story.

To that end, this rewrite of the elements reflects where we stand in this journey. It is not only a renaming and reordering of the elements, but a complete rethinking of our approach to digital storytelling. And because we view the storytelling process as a journey, we feel that framing our approach around the metaphor of "Steps," rather than "Elements," will more practically guide storytellers along the path of creating a meaningful digital story.

We want stories. We love stories. Stories keep us alive. Stories that come from a place of deep insight and with a knowing wink to their audience, and stories that tease us into examining our own feelings and beliefs, and stories that guide us on our own path. But most importantly, stories told as stories.

What's new in this rewrite is the idea that we are helping our storytellers fully visualize their story as a finished piece before they begin to write their script. This means that during our group process called the Story Circle, which is discussed at length later in the book, we want to help each storyteller not only find and clarify the story being told, but also check in with them about how they feel about it, identify the moment of change in their story, then use that to help them think through how the audience will see and hear their story in the form of a digital story. And finally, after the Story Circle is completed, and the storyteller has had some time alone with his or her thoughts, they can then let all of these considerations inform them as they sit down to write.

Step 1: Owning Your Insights

We want to help storytellers find and clarify what their stories are about. We often start with the question: "What's the story you want to tell?" and then as a follow-up, "What do you think your story means?" We want to hear not just what the story is about in the obvious sense: "It's about my mom, my vacation, my first real job…" But what it's really about: the storyteller, as the person who lived through the story. And what it's about between the lines. "This story is about my toaster…but really it's about

losing my mom to cancer when I was five … but it's really about how that experience taught me that I am given chances to learn to trust again, over and over."

Finding and clarifying what a story is really about isn't easy. It's a journey in which a storyteller's insight or wisdom can evolve, even revealing an unexpected outcome. Helping storytellers find and own their deepest insights is the part of the journey we enjoy the most. This process can take time to unfold through check-ins and downtime during the duration of a multi-day workshop. Other questions that we ask to help storytellers are simple to ask, but can be difficult to answer: "Why this story? Why now? What makes it today's version of the story? What makes it your version of the story? Who's it for? Who's it to? How does this story show who you are? How does this story show why you are who you are?"

Finding and clarifying stories helps people to understand the context of their lives. This process of self-reflection helps move from an awareness of "I am" to a deeper awareness of "I have been … I am becoming … I am … and I will be…." As life proceeds and is reflected upon, changes can be better understood, and stories have the chance to ripen. Events from the past that may confuse a storyteller hold dormant insights that can be better understood through the realization of self-narratives. And this can happen over the course of years, or from one day to the next. This can even happen in a single moment through the act of hearing another's story of insight, and it can bring those dormant meanings to light, elucidating layers of meaning.

Our Denver Office Director, Daniel Weinshenker, borrows an aphorism from John Gardner when he facilitates storytelling workshops. All stories, they both agree, can really be boiled down to one of two types: 1) "A stranger came to town…" or 2) "We went on a vacation." In other words, change came to you or you went towards change. These stories, in essence, fall into the widely used archetype of the symbolic journey, the journey of self-understanding. And while stories oftentimes have a journey built into them, it is important to recognize that that journey occurs for both the storyteller and the audience alike.

When we hear stories, we listen for answers that we can relate to our own lives. Honoring self-narratives through creative expression with an audience in mind, even an audience of one, offers the opportunity to not only record and string together your insights, but change how others think and feel. The way you tell a story depends on the audience. What you are trying to say, and how you say it, depends on who is listening, what they already know and don't know, and what you want them to know. What may be a story intended solely for you may end up being a story that changes someone else's thoughts or feelings. And conversely, what may be a story for someone else may end up changing the way you think or feel.

In traditional storytelling, it is commonly understood that the purpose of a story is to teach a lesson or moral. For example, if you wanted to teach a lesson to a group of children about the dangers of fire, you would tell them a story relating to fire, maybe an encounter you had in the past, so that they could better understand the danger. However, artificial intelligence theorist Roger Schank tells us that through storytelling it is in fact the teller, rather than the listener, who seeks to learn from the story told. And through the teller's repeated sharing of their story, listeners ask questions, make comments, and tell their own stories in response, which then provide the missing pieces to help the teller find a deeper meaning in their own story. This process allows the

storyteller to own a more complete version of their story and move on.

But what if the story you're trying to tell isn't really yours? What if it's not about "my" anything—"my job, my mom, or my vacation." And instead, it's about "ours?" "Our life together, our divorce?" Or what if it's about "theirs?" "Their community center, their after-school program?" What then? What questions do we ask these storytellers to guide them on their journey? Reread those questions that we ask about clarifying the story—those questions that are simple to ask and hard to answer—and what do you think? We ask them all. Yes, all. In particular, we listen for the answers to these three questions: What makes it your version of the story? How does this story show who you are? And how does this story show why you are who you are? Here's Esperanza's journey of how she found and clarified the story she wanted and needed to tell:

Esperanza has decided to make a story about her non-profit, Familias Unidas, a community organization assisting low-income Latino families with negotiating the social service systems.

From the organizational brochure, and from all the grant proposals she has written, she has a great deal of information about why her organization exists and why it deserves continued community support. She also has ten years of photographs from her work with community members, special events, staff members, and the several times the organization has been recognized with awards.

But as she thinks about the purpose of her story, she realizes that the organization's mission statement fails to capture the emotional essence of what they truly do, or why she's even a part of it. If the digital story is going to be presented to their supporters at the Christmas fundraiser, and then be placed on the website, it needs to move people and not just present a list of activities, goals, and objectives.

Esperanza decides to create a portrait of the Sanchez family, one of the families Familias Unidas has worked with. When she goes to meet with them, they express interest, but as they talk about the role of Familias Unidas in their lives, Esperanza realizes their story only touches on one or two of the six programs the organization offers. She realizes that she needs several families to capture a broad enough view about the organization in order to connect with the different stakeholders in her communities of support. "This is so much work," she thinks, "and this will never get done."

She is the director of the program, and as it is, she barely has time to work on the project. That night, she speaks with her partner, Carolina, who laughs about how Esperanza is always getting overwhelmed. "This is just like how you started the whole thing, fresh out of college," Carolina says. "You were just full of ideals. You started helping a few of your cousin's friends get some paperwork turned in for the local clinic, and the next thing I know, you were helping everyone in the barrio. You hardly slept then."

Esperanza remembered these times, how passionate she felt, and how her passion inspired others to take up this work and to give donations to support it. "Maybe that's the story," she says aloud, "not just what we do, but why we do it, why I do it, and how caring starts with just one person."

She calls her cousin and asks if he would be willing to tell the story of those first projects. He says he would be honored. She starts writing, and the words flow. From this beginning story, she connects the Sanchez family's experience to show how the program

became legitimized, and she finishes with a reflection on her own growth and the gifts that this work has given her.

At midnight, she closes her laptop. Esperanza sees the movie playing in her head. "I know just the images to use."

Step 2: Owning Your Emotions

As we help storytellers find and clarify what their stories are about and ask them to consider the meaning contained within their stories, we also want to help them become aware of the emotional resonance of their story. By identifying the emotions in the story, they can then decide which emotions they would like to include in their story and how they would like to convey them to their audience.

To help storytellers identify the emotions in their story, we ask a series of questions regarding their process: "As you shared your story, or story idea, what emotions did you experience? Can you identify at what points in sharing your story you felt certain emotions? If you experienced more than one emotion, were they contrasting?" And as the storyteller gains awareness of their emotional connection to the story, they can begin to think about how others might connect on an emotional level. To help storytellers decide how to convey emotional content, we ask a second set of questions: "Which emotions will best help the audience understand the journey contained within your story? Is there an overall tone that captures a central theme? Can you convey your emotions without directly using "feeling" words or relying on clichés to describe them? For example, how can you imply the idea of happiness without saying, 'I felt happy?'"

When we reflect on the emotions within in our stories, we realize that they can be complex, and with this realization we oftentimes discover deeper layers of a story's meaning. For example, stories of wedding celebrations can also be about overcoming loneliness and facing new struggles in forging lasting partnerships. Joyous births can also be about working through the fear of shouldering new responsibility. Restful vacations can also be about recognizing the stress that shapes our daily lives. Grieving the loss of a loved one can also be about appreciating the wisdom that they have imparted. Thus having an awareness of the contrasting and complex nature of a story's emotional content will not only help get us in touch with the core of the story's meaning, but also determine which emotions to include, and in what sequence to present them to help the audience understand the story.

Taking ownership of the emotions contained within a story will also help the audience connect on a deeper level. But the inclusion of emotions doesn't mean that your audience will meaningfully connect to it, so emotion alone is not the goal. When we, as an audience, hear a story that has an exaggerated tug to emotion, we read it as dishonesty. Conversely, if it seems devoid of emotion, without a hint of struggle or conflict, then we don't believe it either.

So when a storyteller wants the audience to pause long enough to listen, to listen deeply and trust them as a storyteller, they have to convey a sense of awareness and ownership of the emotions contained with their story. We want to help the storytellers be as aware of their emotions as they can be, and demonstrate to the audience that

they believe in what they are saying, and are “in” their story. Unless the storyteller trusts that the audience will connect with the underlying issues of their story, they may not be fully honest with themselves or the audience.

Most audiences know that if the storyteller chooses to leave out information and describes details through inference instead of evidence, then there must be a good reason. But they can also tell the difference between being reticent and indirect, and being purposely superficial. The storyteller may or may not want to disclose intimate details, but it is beneficial for them to demonstrate a respect for their audience.

In story work, as a storyteller reflects on their sense of what the story is about and becomes aware of its emotional content, they must also choose the just-so voice that suits it. And rather than using language constructed for a society that can be judgmental and threatening, the storyteller instead peels back the protective layers and finds the voice that conveys their emotional honesty, as if speaking to a trusted friend.

Within every community, and within every shared experience, there are many different ideas of what it means to disclose information. Therefore, knowing your intended audience can shape the emotional content of your story. The degree of emotional content is also culturally specific, as storytellers are familiar with the codes and clues within their own communities. When a storyteller trusts that they are listening deeply to their own heart and imagines the thoughtful appreciation of a specific audience, they will share what is appropriate to share.

People are rarely presented with opportunities for deep, connected listening, and if they are presented with them, they often don’t take the opportunity to listen with a depth that matches that of the speaker’s. Therefore, our practice is predicated on providing a safe space for telling and listening to emotionally honest stories. Stories that emerge in this sacred space of deep listening can source our emotional core, and can surprise both the teller and the listener. Storytellers in our workshops often choose to address difficult issues—to wink at, stare, and sometimes engage, the demons inside. When you visit the s*torycenter.org* website and view the digital stories we have chosen to share, you will see that they are diverse in theme but consistent in their emotional honesty. To paraphrase Boston-based storyteller, the late Brother Blue, the stories feel like they are traveling the shortest distance from the heart of the storyteller to the viewer’s own heart.

Step 3: Finding The Moment

Finding and clarifying the insight and emotions of the story can be the most challenging and rewarding part of the storytelling process. As the storyteller becomes clear about the meaning of their story, we want to help them tell their story as a story by identifying a single moment that they can use to illustrate their insight. To help storytellers find this moment, we ask a series of questions: “What was the moment when things changed? Were you aware of it at the time? If not, what was the moment you became aware that things had changed? Is there more than one possible moment to choose from? If so, do they convey different meanings? Which most accurately conveys the meaning in your story? Can you describe the moment in detail?” Once this moment of change is identified, we help storytellers determine how it will be used to shape the story.

Our lives comprise an infinite number of moments, and some of those moments are loaded with more meaning than others. The moment of change might be the most memorable or dramatic moment, or it may have occurred without the storyteller even noticing it at the time or grasping its significance in their life. Whether the storyteller became aware of it at the time or in reflection, we want to help them find the moment of change that best represents the insight that they wish to convey. And depending on the story, they may choose from any number of moments as an entry point into their insight. For a story about trust, for example, a storyteller might choose the moment that he or she lost trust in a relationship, or regained it, or recognized its importance. Or there may be a single, obvious moment of change. For a story about a loved one's death, for example, it may be when the storyteller's phone rang and they got the news.

Reflecting on your personal insights and emotions allows you to find the moments of change that have occurred in your life. As mentioned in above discussions, audiences like to hear about change because they're looking for answers about change in their own lives. However, rather than listening to someone share their wisdom and insights with us through a report or an essay on the morals or lessons learned, we prefer when it is told to us as a story.

Compelling stories reproduce the insight and experience of the storyteller while prompting the audience to ask questions about their own experiences and look for larger truths. Compelling storytellers construct scenes to show how change happened, how they dealt with it, what they were like before the change, and what they are like after. A storyteller sharing their insight within a story says to the audience, in essence: This is what has happened and this is what I have learned. By building a scene around the moment of change, the storyteller is "showing," rather than "telling."

"Showing" through scene is part of the pleasure for the audience as they are drawn into the moment of change and actively construct their own interpretations. If you can paint the audience a portrait of both you, and your experience of the moment of change, then you are creating a scene. As you recall the moment of change, ask yourself these questions: What do you see? What do you hear? What's being said? What are your thoughts? What are your feelings? What is the context behind your feelings? Have you been in this situation before or since? Have you been in these surroundings, or had these thoughts or feelings before or since? When? Is that part of this story?

How much of a scene you build around the moment of change, how you integrate that scene into the story, and the total number of scenes depends on how much information the audience needs to know in order to understand. What happened before that moment, what happened after? Does the audience need more or less information? What are the key details that will help the audience appreciate the moment of change? Over the course of a three to five minute piece, a digital story can consist of a single scene, or it can consist of several. Because the format is relatively short, it's important to select your scenes with care and establish them concretely to ensure that they are contributing to the overall piece.

As the audience, we uncover meaning in the way the storyteller has shaped their story. The events of the story lead us to conclusions but don't constrict our own discovery, and the moment of change and the scenes built around it lead the audience to

a river of understanding. However, they are the ones who have to jump in. And in this way they become participants in the narrative—to make that jump, to fill that void.

Step 4: Seeing Your Story

Finding the moment of change in your story and describing it within a scene is the starting point to telling the story as a story. However, because we help storytellers share their stories in the form of a digital story, we also want to look at how the use of visuals and sound bring things to life for the audience. There are many choices that come along with designing how the audience will "see" and "hear" the digital story. Let's begin with visuals. We discuss visual choices early in the story conception process so that storytellers consider how the use of images will shape their story. In order to "see" their story, we help storytellers describe the images that come to mind, understand what those images convey, find or create those images, and then determine how best to use them to convey their intended meaning.

As part of this process of creating a visual narrative, we ask storytellers: "What images come to mind when recalling the moment of change in the story? What images come to mind for other parts of the story?" At this point in the process, we want storytellers to simply call these images to mind, whatever they are, without being concerned about whether or not they exist as actual photos. Next, we want storytellers to explore the meaning that these images convey, and so we ask them: "Why this image? What is it conveying to you? Is the meaning explicit or implicit? Does it have more than one meaning? If so, can you describe the multiple meanings?" Once the storyteller is clear about the meaning they want to convey with their visuals, we help them decide how they will find or create these images, and how they will use them. We ask: "Do you already have these images or will you need to find or create them? How could you use the images that you already have to convey your meaning?"

In her first digital storytelling workshop, designer and filmmaker Lina Hoshino decided to tell her mother's story about the evolution of her name into Chinese and Japanese as a result of the Japanese Occupation and then the Chinese Civil War in Taiwan. At one point in her digital story, Lina shows the Nationalist Party leader, Chiang Kai-shek, in a series of images as she discusses the history. But rather than simply showing the entire formal portrait that she found in the public domain (as part of the F.D. Roosevelt Library), she chose to present the image as a series of crops and a pan.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

The original image that she found (*Figure 1*) shows the stately dictator seated with a sword in one hand and a prominently placed medal on his uniform. Lina dissects the full portrait into three cropped details that feature the medal (*Figure 2*), the resting fist (*Figure 3*), and the other hand holding the decorated hilt of the sword (*Figure 4*). After these three images, she then shows the portrait at shoulder height (*Figure 5*) and then slowly pans in and slightly to the left ending on the final frame (*Figure 6*).

Compositionally, the shots move from the medal in the left third, to the fist in the center, to the hilt/hand in the right third. The next shot, the cropped portrait of Chiang, remains in the right third of the frame. Dynamic motion across the frame is created with these detailed stills. In contrast, the slow pan returns our eyes towards the left side of the frame as we are carried along the gaze of the subject. Chiang's Kuomintang army came to Lina's mother's home island of Taiwan with imperial will. Lina amplifies this through her cropping of the image to the focus on the visual representations of power—details of the medal, gloved fist, martial hilt, and gaze of the leader.

When thinking about creating a digital story, many storytellers who are new to the form will simply envision an image that mirrors each of the different points throughout their entire narrative. These types of literal or direct images that are used to illustrate a story are called explicit imagery. Explicit imagery is useful for conveying the necessary details of your story or helping to set the scene for your audience. For example, when a storyteller says, "This is the house where I grew up" and shows a photo of a house, the audience understands that this is literally "the house." By intentionally choosing to show the house, the storyteller is also letting us know that it is important for us to see this house in order to understand the details of their story. When considering which images to use and how to use them, we want to help storytellers be clear about the important details that would not be understood or appreciated without the use of explicit imagery. To do this, we ask: "Would the audience be able to understand the story's meaning without this image?"

However, not all aspects of a story's meaning are best conveyed through the use of explicit imagery. When considering an image, a storyteller can ask: "Is this image conveying another layer of meaning?" If so, then the image has an implicit use. Implicit

imagery is useful for implying or representing another meaning beyond an image's explicit or literal meaning. Two common techniques for a storyteller to convey their meaning through the use of implicit imagery are visual metaphor and juxtaposition.

When calling images to mind from the moment of change in their story, a storyteller may select an aspect of the scene that stands out for them, but is not an explicit illustration of the event. For example, when sharing a story about losing a childhood home and describing the moment of change, a storyteller may find that a nearby tree, rather than the house itself, is the dominant image they call to mind. As they consider the significance of the tree in their story, they may discover that it represents the idea of stability in their life. The use of an image of a tree to convey stability in their story is a visual metaphor.

The images you choose and the way you combine them will work to create additional layers of meaning. The placement of one image followed by another to create a new layer of meaning is called juxtaposition. An image of a house followed by an image of cardboard boxes, for example, conveys moving. However, until we know more of the story, we may not know if the message is really about loss, freedom, or maybe both. If the next image is an open road, this could represent freedom. Audiences "read" the juxtaposition of visual images as having implicit meaning that goes beyond what one of the other images explicitly means on its own.

A limitation of material can spark creativity. A storyteller may not possess photos from the major scenes in his or her life. Most people have pictures of their weddings, but who has pictures of their divorce proceedings? Storytellers in our workshops may have only a few photos to work with, or none at all. But paying attention to the images that come to mind when initially sharing the story will help lead the way in creating a visual narrative. And although production time of new material is limited in our workshops, if storytellers are clear about what they want to create, then taking pictures, shooting short segments of video footage, or drawing and scanning images are all good options.

The length of our workshops is typically limited to about 3–5 days. This constraint on time can help the creative process, but it can also lead to choices about images that are less often considered than the words they accompany. For example, composing a visual narrative with images grabbed from an Internet search can be a quick solution, but oftentimes these images can take away from the integrity of the story. But more importantly, if storytellers have not allowed time early on to see how their images can do some of the heavy lifting of storytelling, they may find they would have altered their script to work with the images they ultimately use.

Well-chosen images act as mediators between the narrative and the audience. As stated in earlier discussions, audiences enjoy stories that lead them to a metaphorical river of meaning and require them to "jump in" in order to make their own connections. Images can grab the hands of the audience and show them the river's immensity. And images have the power to reveal something to the audience that words just can't say.

Step 5: Hearing Your Story

We've just looked at how visuals help bring a story to life. Now, let's look at sound. The recorded voice of the storyteller telling their story is what makes what we call a "digital story" a digital story—not a music video or narrated slideshow. By this point in the process, the emotional tone of the story has been identified, and sound is one of the best ways to convey that tone—through the way the voice-over is performed, the words that are spoken, and the ambient sound and music that work with the narrative. When considering the use of sound, we help storytellers by asking: "Beyond the recorded voiceover, would the story and the scenes within it be enhanced by the use of additional layers of sound? Would the use of ambient sound or music highlight the turning point in your story?"

In digital stories, voice not only tells a vital narrative but it also captures the essence of the narrator, their unique character, and their connection to the lived experience. One's voice is a truly great gift as it is a testament to one's fragility and strength. But why does voice matter so much? In a speech, for example, we are listening for an applause line. In a lecture, we are listening for the major points, or an outline of information. But in a story, we are listening for the shape of an organic, rhythmic quality that allows us to drift into reverie. Here we have a complex interaction between following the story and allowing the associative memories the story conjures up to flow around us. If an image acts as the hand that leads us into the river, the voice is the riverbed below our feet.

When writing a voice-over, it is important to remember that the piece, in its final form, will move from being words on the page to being spoken aloud. And unlike a speech or spoken-word performance, this spoken narration will exist within a digital story complete with accompanying images and possibly other layers of sound. Because of this film-like format, storytellers want to pay special attention to their choice of words and phrasing and the impact they will have. Less is often more, both in descriptive detail, and in the formality of language. This form is served well by the storyteller mimicking how they speak when they tell a story to a friend, unscripted and unrehearsed, for the first time after having just experienced it. They use incomplete or broken sentences, interrupted thoughts, and a haunting precision of choice words that make the details come alive for both the teller and listener. The more the spoken voice is inserted into the written script, the more the qualities of a person will come across and pull the audience into the story.

Digital stories that have the recorded voice as the only audio track can be tremendously powerful at conveying tone and meaning. When considering whether or not to add layers of sound, we help storytellers approach the process by starting with as little additional sound as possible and then ask: "Is this enhancing the story, or taking away from it?" If it is enhancing the story, then add a little more and ask the question again. One way to add some sound is to think about the ambient sounds that come up when recalling the moment of change in the story. When we listen to the scenes in our stories, they may include sounds that exist in the background of everyday life––traffic, birds, airplanes, voices, for example. These types of sounds help create a sense of place for the audience. There is no question that ambient sound can add complexity to a story. They help to set the scene and feeling, and its addition helps the audience better understand the significance of a scene, especially if there is a dominant sound that best captures its essence.

When creating these ambient sounds, it may be simplest to record them from the available sounds nearby rather than search for pre-existing recordings. Also, the use of your recorded voice or that of another person to create additional layers of ambient sound can be very powerful, yet very simple.

As with ambient sound, storytellers can consider how the minimal use of music can enhance a story by giving it rhythm and character. From an early age we become aware that music can alter our perception of visual information. We see how music in a film stirs up an emotional response very different from what the visual information inherently suggests. By trying out different pieces of music you can change not only the story's tone, but also its meaning and direction. The use of instrumental music, whatever the genre, can enhance the style and meaning of the story's text and visual narratives without competing with the voiceover. While popular lyrical music may work, mistakes are sometimes made in mixing the story of the song and the voiceover in a way that gives an unintended conflict of meaning. However, by intentionally juxtaposing the messages, you may create another layer of meaning that adds depth and complexity to your story.

In our experience, storytellers have an intuitive sense of the music that is appropriate for a digital story. People walk around with songs playing in their heads which can set the mood of one's day, change the way we perceive spaces and places, and establish a rhythm for our steps.

A Note on Copyright

Your writing, recorded voice and personal images belong to you. When you consider using others' music, you cross into the territory of deciding what should be the appropriate fair use of the copyrighted material. Put simply, whatever the music choice, honor it by providing a credit at the end of the piece. If you are going to make money directly or indirectly by the presentation or distribution of the piece you have created, then you should have the artist's permission to use the music. Fortunately there are a growing number of legal online music collections that provide free and affordable media, as well as software to assist you in designing a soundtrack that is wholly yours.

Step 6: Assembling Your Story

At this point in the process you have found and clarified what your story is about and how it sits with you today. You have also established the overall tone you want to convey. You've identified a moment of change and begun making choices about how to use visuals and sound to bring the story and scenes to life for your audience. Now you are ready to assemble your story by spreading out your notes and images and composing your script and storyboard. This requires answering two questions: How are you structuring the story? And, within that structure, how are the layers of visual and audio narratives working together? But those aren't simple questions. Where do you start? Let's look at the question of structure. You've identified the moment of change,

but at what point in the story will it appear? Is it at the beginning, middle, end, or is it divided up at different points throughout the story? Or is it the entire story? What other details or scenes are necessary to provide context for the moment of change? And in what order will sequence all this information?

When we tell stories for the first time after we have just experienced an event, we may want to launch right in, but if we see a confused or disinterested look on our listener's face then we should know to stop and say, "Wait, let me back up. In order to appreciate what I'm telling you, you have to know this..." In essence, we understand that the listener is lacking some important information in order to "get it," and so we choose to provide our audience with a backstory, or exposition. In going back to fill in details for our audience, depending how well they know us and know our life's ongoing narrative, we may find ourselves believing that we need to tell them everything, but quickly realize that this is impossible. A complete telling of every bit of detail is never really "complete," and in the process we begin editing, choosing which details we feel are the most necessary to include in order to construct meaning. In this real-time editing process, we are absorbing our listener's experience and making many choices about where their interest is peaked, where they seem lost, and where they are with us on the journey.

This process of telling stories and reading the audience's reaction is critical to understanding story structure. It helps answer the questions: What are the necessary parts of my story? How will telling this part shape the story differently or take it in a different direction? Knowing which pieces of information are necessary to include allows us to then determine the best way to order those pieces and keep our audience engaged. As the storyteller, we know where the treasure (insight) is hidden, and we are giving our audience clues to find it.

The joy of storytelling comes in determining how much to tell them and at what point. As our narrative literacy progresses from the comprehension of nursery rhymes towards a more intricate understanding of complex narratives, we desire more subtlety in a story's form. As the audience, we are less likely to look for intended morals and spelled-out meanings, and will instead draw from it what we find important. But presenting the conflicts, problems, or unanswered questions with subtlety requires not only identifying the right conflict but the right amount of conflict.

Daniel Weinshenker describes building tension in a story's structure by using a cat analogy: When you are playing with a cat and holding a string for it to chase, if you make it too simple, it will get offended, or bored, and likely walk away. If you make it too difficult and never let it catch the string, then it will give up. But the joy in the game is finding the balance between making it just hard enough to challenge the cat, keeping him engaged in trying to catch the string, and letting him savor it when he does.

In other words, don't give away too much information all at once. Allow your audience to enjoy the challenge. And rather than establishing a chronological telling of events with the moment of change positioned as the story's climax, you might instead try moving the moment of change to the beginning with little or no context, which may leave the moment hanging to pique the interest of the audience, and then go back and fill in more and more details and scenes and allow the audience to piece together the meaning and resolution. However, to do this you need to pay special attention to your audience's experience.

For example, if you begin the story with something provocative and don't reveal the piece that explains it until the end, you may need to remind the audience about the question in the first place so they can savor the ending.

Once the basic structure of the story is outlined, the next step is scripting and storyboarding, or in other words, laying out how the visual and audio narratives will complement each other over the duration of the piece to best tell the story. The most common approach that storytellers take to planning their story in our workshops is to write notes in the margins of their script in order to reference where certain images or sounds will occur. In the next chapter we discuss storyboarding in detail, and provide a sample template that includes a series of tracks that you can fill in with notes about the visuals and their effects, voice-over and sound. As you determine how your visual and audio narratives are working together within each of these layers, ask yourself: Do I want them to be redundant, complementary, juxtaposing, or disjunctive?

Considering the above question will not only help you determine how the various layers contribute to the story, but it will also help you economize each in relationship to one another. You can ask yourself: If I have an image that conveys my meaning better than words can, how can I use my words to tell another aspect of the scene? In digital stories, the way we combine the layers to convey meaning allows us to economize the presentation of information and lets our audience make the connections. For example, if we hear a phone ring and the storyteller says, "I held my breath as I got the news…" and we see a photo of a loved one fade to black, we may understand that the storyteller is conveying a sense of loss. This process of the audience understanding bits and pieces of information as a single idea is called "closure." And as we edit down our scripts and choose each of our images, we need to think about how we set up opportunities for the audience to provide closure with each layer of the story independently, as well as in relation to each other. Oftentimes, this means your script requires fewer words. In an effort to help our storytellers, we provide formal constraints in the production of their digital stories: A word count of 250–375, and fewer than twenty images or video segments. This type of creative limitation helps the storyteller figure out what's most important in his or her story, while also helping to organize their time in the production process.

After your story edits are assembled, pacing is one of the final considerations in creating a digital story because it requires an assessment of how all the layers of information are working over the entire length of the piece. When pacing your story, ask yourself: How does the pacing contribute to the story's meaning? How would pace, or rhythm, bring emphasis to the moment of change?

A story's rhythm conveys an added layer of meaning. A fast pace with quick edits and upbeat music can convey urgency. A slow pace with gradual transitions and extended shots may convey calmness. A mechanically paced story may work nicely for a piece about the monotony of an assembly line job, but for an adventure story it will flatten the experience of the joys and hardships that the audience is expecting to savor. Adjusting the pace of your story provides an opportunity for the audience to listen more clearly. Stories can move along at an even pace, stop to take a deep breath, and then proceed. Creating space for silence, for example, provides the audience with time for all layers of the story to be absorbed. Even if you think your story is paced too slowly, chances are your audience will appreciate more time than you think to allow their minds to explore the thoughts and emotions that are being stirred within them.

The assemblage of your story takes time, and isn't easy. However, our best advice is to keep it simple.

Digital stories contain multiple visual and audio layers.

The visual layers are:

- The composition of a single image
- The combination of multiple images within a single frame, either through collage or fading over time
- The juxtaposition of a series of images over time
- Movement applied to a single image, either by panning or zooming or the juxtaposition of a series of cropped details from the whole image
- The use of text on screen in relation to visuals, spoken narration, or sound

The audio layers are:

- Recorded voice-over
- Recorded voice-over in relation to sound, either music or ambient sound
- Music alone or in contrast to another piece of music

Step 7: Sharing Your Story

At this point in the process, the layers of the story have been assembled. Finding and clarifying the insight, and creating the digital story have taken the storyteller on a journey of self-understanding. The story and the insight it conveys may have evolved throughout the process. Therefore, it is important to take time now to revisit the context in which the story was initially described in order to determine the relevant information to include when the story is being shared. To help storytellers do this, we ask: "Who is your audience? What was your purpose in creating the story? Has the purpose shifted during the process of creating the piece? In what presentation will your digital story be viewed? And what life will the story have after it's completed?"

Before the final version is exported, consider the audience once more, but this time in terms of how you will *present* the digital story. You may be planning to show your it to one individual, one time, for a specific reason. Or you may be planning to share it online with as many people as possible. But for most storytellers their plans fall somewhere in between, or they may not yet know the full extent that they will eventually share their story. But in any event, it's important to consider the contextualizing information you want to convey to your audience, both as part of the digital story and alongside it.

During our workshops we ask if storytellers want to say anything before their story is screened. Some say, "No, I'll let the story speak for itself," and others tell a bit more in order to set it up. When we share stories on our own website we provide a short description of the story and the storyteller's responses to a few questions: *Tell us a a little about yourself. Why did you choose this story to tell? How have you changed as a result of telling this story?*

Knowing more about the story, the storyteller, or both, can reveal a new depth of appreciation by the audience. For example, the First Interlude of this book features Monte Hallis' Tanya, a story about how Monte discovers the meaning of friendship through knowing Tanya during her fight with AIDS. The backstory she provided in person before her story was screened at the workshop was that Tanya had passed away. The story around a piece changes and expands over time. In another example, the Fourth Interlude of this book highlights a young man's story about the sacrifices his immigrant grandparents made in order to provide a better life for their family in a small town in Texas. The story ends with a photo of the storyteller in his cap and gown but the back-story reveals that he was accepted to Brown University and returned to mentor young people in his hometown.

Considering your audience at this point in the production process may alter how you complete the final edits. If you know who the audience will be for your piece and what they know about you, then it will help determine how much context you decide to provide about the story. Contextualizing information can be either within or outside of the story's script. If your intended audience already knows certain details about you and your story, then it will help determine which details you include in your script, and which details can instead be revealed through outside contextualizing information. You may choose to contextualize the story outside of the script, but still within the actual piece, by providing a title screen at the beginning and text screens at either the beginning or end that display additional information. This is a common technique used in films in order to set up a story, or communicate what happened to a character or situation thereafter.

Being clear about your purpose in creating the story and how it may have shifted during the process of creating the piece will help you determine how you present and share your story. In our programmatic custom workshops, sometimes the storytellers are recruited with the understanding that their stories will address a certain topic and be presented in a specific context. For example, in a project with foster youth, their host organization may ask if they would like to participate in a workshop in which they tell a personal story about their idea of the "permanency" of family, and have their story be included in a training program for social workers. The storytellers are informed about the expectation before agreeing to attend the workshop. And within the workshop, they are invited to share their larger life story during the first of two Story Circles. Then during a second Story Circle they focus their story in a way that is meaningful and timely to them, and also addresses the specific purpose with which the stories will be to shared. Knowing that their story will have this additional audience and purpose will help them appropriately frame their story. In the interviews that follow in this book, Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Amy Hill both discuss the issue of presenting stories within their intended context.

If you know the presentation setting in which your audience will view your digital story, then it will help you determine what kind of contextualizing materials should accompany the piece, and will also provide more time during the digital story to focus on other content in the story. For example, if a storyteller makes a story about the successes of their afterschool program with the intention of presenting it on their organization's website, they know that the audience will be able to learn more by exploring the information online, and therefore won't need be concerned with including it in the digital story.

Whether your piece will be integrated into a live or published presentation, or is but one in a series of related digital stories that you create, or one that acts as a prompt to elicit others' stories, it is wise to prepare in advance by thinking through all of the possibilities as your story goes forth to live its life.

Finally

The storytelling process is a journey. And in our workshops, we approach this journey as a facilitated *group* process. We believe that the connections made between people in the Story Circle help to focus and inspire each individual throughout the process. For many of the storytellers we help, the digital story they create in our workshops may be the *only* digital story they ever make, in part because overcoming the challenge of finding and clarifying the insights and emotions in their story is not easily done alone. Therefore, we recommend that digital storytellers connect with others to share ideas and work through these steps together.

3 Approaches to Scripting

After the first year of offering digital storytelling workshops in 1994, Nina and I saw the need to closely examine how people approached the writing process for their digital stories. Just because the subject matter was clear to a workshop participant, it wasn't always easy to get the script written. In the last chapter we discussed the insights and structure for your story, as well as the considerations for working with multiple forms of media. In this chapter we will discuss the notion of how to find your best creative voice for self-expression in writing, about how writing happens, and about what makes the way you write unique and powerful.

As with our approach to digital storytelling in general, we find that our practice is ideally suited to group settings. And while you can use these ideas to get started on your own, success happens just as often by comparing your work to others, and by hearing a variety of examples. So find a few friends, declare yourself a writer's group, gather once-a-week for a month, and share your writing. Your digital story will thank you for your efforts.

Our Friend, the 4 x 6 Index Card

Of all the suggestions that we have made in helping people to prepare their writing, the use of 4 x 6 index cards has garnered the most praise.

The idea is simple: Novice and experienced writers alike inevitably suffer from a malady aptly called "blank page syndrome." The weight of filling a blank page, or more than likely, many pages, can easily crush our creative initiative, and as a result, cause us some difficulty in getting started. In our workshops, when we have found a person blankly staring at their monitors with a deer-in-the-headlights look in their eye, we like to hand them a 4 x 6 index card and say, "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." We might also give them a prompt: "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 card is small, and it is finite. It seems possible, and perhaps even easy to fill. So for the novice, in other words, we are saying, "Just get this much down, and we'll work from there." And for writers confident in their ability to write countless pages of prose, this excercise is a creative challenge. To them, we say, "We know you could write a novel, now just try and say it in only this much space."

One of my favorite Mark Twain quotes is from a letter that he wrote to a friend: "Forgive me, this is a long letter. I would have written you a short letter, but I didn't have the time."

Shorter isn't always easier for the mature writer. The 4 x 6 card also helps condense the narrative by breaking the story down to its most basic elements and forcing a writer to

ask, “What are my choices in the beginning? How quickly must I get into the action of the narrative?” Usually, this approach means sacrificing the long exposition that accompanies the first draft of a story. But in the end, if the writing is no longer than the front and back of a 4 x 6 card, or one double-spaced, typewritten page, it ensures that the writing will lead to a two-to-three minute story complete with narration.

Writing Exercises

In a group process, we are proponents of writing exercises. While we are fully aware of the potential and beauty of free writing, it’s important to have a class spend ten to twenty minutes writing down whatever comes to their mind. I have found that the shared themes and ideas of a prompted idea can connect people to each other in wonderful ways.

This is my favorite prompt:

> *In our lives there are moments, decisive moments, when the direction of our lives was pointed in a given direction, and because of the events of this moment, we are going in another direction. Poet Robert Frost shared this concept simply as “The Road Not Taken”. 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. Right now, at this second, write about a decisive moment in your life. You have ten minutes.*

The writing that comes from this prompt, when it comes unannounced at the beginning of a workshop, often goes straight to the emotional core of the author’s life. The act of sharing of these kinds of stories can be instantly bonding for a group.

If the goal of the exercise is to prompt distant memories, we have not found a better approach than theorist Bill Roorbach’s idea of having participants in the workshop first draw a map of the neighborhood where they grew up. Reaching back in one’s memory to locate the layout of the streets, where friends lived, the names of friendly or strange neighbors, 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, trying to remember a time by remembering the places of that time, the places you traveled through on a daily basis, a neighborhood, a house, or a room, usually leads quickly to events that are rich with the kinds of meaningful inspections that make good stories.

There are innumerable prompts that might work for various situations. Here is a short list of some themes for which prompts could also be built for powerful stories. Books about writing are filled with these exercises, so don’t forget to pick up a few when it’s time to delve deeper into your interest in writing beyond he digital storytelling experience:

– 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, at your job or at some other event or activity, when you would’ve been typically competent or successful, and how that all changed when everything fell apart before your eyes.
– Describe a time when you felt really scared.

– Tell the story of a "first"—first kiss, first day on a job, first time trying something really difficult, the first time your heard a favorite song, etc.
– And of course, the old standby: What was the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to you?

These Stories from These Pictures

Digital stories often start with the pictures. Our easiest direction to anyone thinking about making a digital story is to look around his or her 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, you will 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 emphasized as an outgrowth of a successful draft of the narrative. However, some people that come to the workshop have taken the absolutely opposite approach to the process. They will pull out the photos for their story, arrange them on a table, and sort them out in order from beginning to end. Then, with the story visually organized, they start writing. Is this approach effective? Of course it can be—great stories have emerged through this process.

Our only caveat regarding this approach is to consider whether or not responding to the images alone will leave out parts of a story that were never captured in any of your images. If you find that you would like to see an image in your story that you don't have available, you can look to an illustration, or appropriately implicit or metaphorical images to capture the sense of the writing that suit the purposes of your story.

Getting into the Scene

When authors come to our digital storytelling workshops, we have them share first drafts and talk about their ideas for their stories. Oftentimes, I find myself discussing the notion of scene with the authors. As an example, I can take one approach to my own story about my father's death:

Well first of all, let me just say, I was seventeen at the time and I had finished high school that summer. My dad had smoked three-packs-a-day, and had been trying to quit smoking for a couple of months. He was sixty-one, and had a difficult life as a union organizer working in Texas and throughout the South. But we had gone on a vacation the month before and he seemed like he was doing okay.

He came down from his bedroom saying that he had a terrible pain.

We called the doctor. The doctor said that it was probably an ulcer attack. He had had several of those. We waited. He got much worse. We decided to rush him to the hospital. It was a heart attack. He died within a half-hour. My mom was hysterical. It was a night I will always remember.

What we have is a fairly typical set of expository contexts, and a sequence of events that most people use to casually recall a major catastrophe in their lives. This approach is a fairly direct and distanced recitation of the facts, and it usually finishes with a statement that is conclusive. In this example, the recalled memory is understated and obvious to the extreme. If this were a dramatic dialogue, a speech by an actor pretending to be natural, it would be fine.

But here is a description of the same memory that I shared at my mother's memorial in 2001, twenty-seven years after my father died:

> *I will never forget the sound of my mom's voice when the doctor said, "George is dead."*
>
> *"God No! No! No!"*
>
> *A scream. A release. An explosion.*
>
> *The sound of her wail bounced off all the walls of the emergency room at Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas, bounced down the streets and through the trees, bounced out into the night sky, all the way across the universe of my young mind.*
>
> *In a single moment, a single pronouncement, everything changed for my mom. It divided her life in two, and it taught me that love can reach down into the cellular essence of awareness, and with its rupture, tear a human being in half.*

What differentiates these two texts for me is the fact that in the second text, I am asking my audience to immediately journey in time with me to the exact instant when it all really happened. No context, other than the assumption that "George" must be someone really important, and the feelings, best as I remembered them, that accompanied the defining moment of the experience; my mom's reaction to the doctor's words. And finally, with over twenty-five years of perspective, what that means to me now.

In the above example, I tried to take the audience into the scene at the hospital. I could have described the way it looked and smelled, where we were standing moments before the doctor came up, and what happened afterwards, but all of that was assumed when I said it was the moment that my father was pronounced dead. Instead, it serviced the quality of the writing to strip away all of the descriptive material. We have found that audiences really can build an elaborate understanding of the story if they can get a sense of the pretext of an event. Furthermore, we know that much of what seems like important background, or exposition, is in fact superfluous to what really happened and what it really felt like to be there.

Taking the audience to the moment of an important scene, one that either initiates or concludes your tale, and putting them in your shoes, is why we listen to the story. We want to know how characters react. We want to imagine ourselves there as participants or witnesses, and we want to know what someone else takes away from the experience and uses to lead their own lives forward.

This idea of scene-placement is related but separate from the terms of the specific disciplines of literature, theater and film. Dramatic scenes all have complex sets of conventions that allow us to observe the action of characters within a continuous time of the narrative. In our thinking about scene, we want to encourage people to share at least one portion of their narrative as a scene—to write as if they were there, inside the events as they unfolded, experiencing the shock, surprise, or amusement, for example, for the first time. For many stories, this strips away the superficial consideration of the events, and gets to the heart of the matter.

Character Studies and Personal Story

We know that most of our parents are multi-faceted, complex humans. In one story, it may serve to have the parent in the classic role of the ideal mentor, thereby filling one stereotype of parenthood. In another story, the parent may be a beast, or display beastly behavior, but if we are mature enough, and we are given one small nugget of context, for example: "When they got drunk, they would be mean," it is sufficient for us to imagine that they had good days as well. We are probably aware that the story is a cautionary tale about human behavior, not the evidence to indict the guilty party.

Lagos Egri, author of the bible of my training in dramatic theory, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, reduced all great storytelling and theater to the author's understanding of the true nature of the characters he invents in the world of his narrative. Like most people, when I watch a film or a play, I know when character development has been rendered ineffective when I am able to say to myself, "You know, that character would have never said those words, or behaved in that way." In any story, it simply will not work if both characters strengths and flaws do not drive the series of events forward, leading logically to the climactic clash or coming together that delivers the conclusion of the story.

When we write in the first person about real events and real people, we make the same choices as the fictional author, that is, describe those details of the character that are pertinent to the story. It is nothing short of egomaniacal to imagine that our characters are faithful portraits of actual people. In our digital stories, they are not even sketches, but rather, more like cartoons or contour drawings—brief and subtle outlines that highlight their most compelling, and relevant qualities.

Some of the writers that have participated in our workshops are fixated on elaborating their characters. They fear providing too simplistic a picture of the people they are describing, or their behavior in a given context, so they expand the narrative with a multiplicity of facets in order to feel more "fair." Personal storytellers are not judges or juries, they are witnesses. And as witnesses, we seek truth inside and around the simple lines of the sketch of their memories. We, the audience, are only capable of judging the approach they take to establishing the narrative, and whether or not their attitude and tone reflect balanced judgment or unreasonable accusation.

By letting the story dictate the degree to which we know the background of the character, we avoid cluttering some of the prose with assessments that cancel each other out. We can communicate which characteristic, for the purpose of the story, we can fill in with the broad brush of a stereotype sufficient enough for our small tale so the audience can fill in the character with the complexities of their own experiences.

Finally, A Few Words on Style

During my high school and early college days as a young journalist, I carried around a copy of *Elements of Style*, the William Strunk and E.B. White companion for all writers. I have to be frank, except for their call for economy, economy, economy, not much stuck in my sense of the rules of good style. In other words, I am the last person to teach anyone about formal issues of style. Having said that, Strunk and White might have been apoplectic at much of what I love in the styles of the writing of our students. What works, particularly as the words leave the page and are spoken by the authors, is not a case study in language usage according to conventions of grammar and syntax defended by the gatekeepers of the English—or any other—language.

What works is truth. By this, I mean that an author's truth about how he or she conceives of a personal way of storytelling *is* their style. How does truth happen in storytelling? Here is where the metaphor of journey, or quest, serves me best. Good writing has a destination and seeks the shortest path to the destination, but no shorter. The destination is usually the punch line, the pay-off, or the point of the story. Detours should never be accidental, unconscious, or indulgent. Each word and each apparent digression is critical to the final resolution of the characters' action. I am a traditionalist in this idea, having never fallen for what feels to me to be a experimental conceit of an "anything goes" approach to narrative.

But that is my truth. I have had the pleasure of hearing thousands of people share their stories, and each with their own style of telling. Some people like the journey along the road of their story, and the significant learning that happens along the way, rather than the arrival of a singular big lesson or a resulting moral. Other people love the wonderful mystery and elasticity of language, and what they mean by story is what I might mean by poetry. Other people find themselves hearing the sounds of words like music, and really are not concerned with the meaning of the words, per se, as much as the aural jazz of the presentation, for example, that creates a dominant tonal impression, and whose meaning is profoundly more complex than the simple "message" of the story. In that sense, I accept that when it works, it works.

The good news about those of us living at the beginning of the 21st century is that we have an awareness regarding how we *tell* our stories, and how it has much less impact than how we are *heard*. Stories do a number of things to people, but only a small part of what they do has to do with story content and our stylistic intentions. For example, when people hear a story, what is occuring in their lives at that moment that either focuses or distracts their attention? What is the context in which the story is being heard? What is the ambiance of the environment?

4 Storyboarding

A storyboard is a place to plan out a visual story in two dimensions. The first dimension is *time*: what happens first, next, and last. The second is *interaction*: how the the audio—the voice-over narrative of your story and the music—interacts with the images or video. In addition, a storyboard is also a notation of where and how visual effects such as transitions, animations, or compositional organization of the screen will be used.

Storyboarding in the film world is a high art bringing to life a vision of a scene. This composition includes imagining the many choices available to a director regarding camera placement, focal point, shot duration, possible edits, and camera-based effects such as panning and zooming. Storyboard artists combine illustration skills and a sense of stage business (where actors, props and sets are placed before the window of the camera), with cinematography and cinematic theory to write the roadmap for the director and film crew to organize every part of a film production.

The art of film storyboarding has taught anyone working on a story (from mega-movies to digital stories) one important lesson: Planning on paper will save the enormous expense of time, energy and money when it comes time to produce your work. Taking the time to organize your script in the context of a storyboard tells you what visual materials you require. If this exists, from the selection of images you have in your archive, then it just tells you the order of things and makes your edit go quickly. But much more importantly, especially for novice storytellers, storyboards clarify what you do *not* need, and saves you from scanning, photographing, shooting, designing, or recording things that don't fit into a particular story.

Recipes for Disaster

Our cautionary tale concerns Rick, just an average guy, getting ready to make his first digital story:

"What a great morning," thought Rick, stepping out his back door and going to the little studio he had cleared out of a corner in his garage. "Today, I become a filmmaker. I am going to make my first digital story this weekend. Today, I'll assemble all the material I need. Tomorrow, I'll edit it all together."

ick's story was a tribute to his parents. Their 40th wedding anniversary was in a week, and he had a great idea about a retrospective on their lives. He had taken two large boxes of photos and a few old 8 mm films from his parent's home earlier in the week. He was confident that if he could just sort through the stuff, the story would write itself. "I know that's how Ken Burns does it, just gather all the sources and piece it together like a puzzle."

He had his computer fired up. He had a scanner and digital camera handy, and the video camera set up on a tripod next to the old 8 mm projector. He was going to project the film against a sheet he had hung on the wall and then record it. "Ingenious," he thought to himself.

The day began smoothly. Rick organized the photos into piles representing five decades of his parent's life together. "These are great," he thought. "I'll scan these eight from the 1950s, and these twelve from the 1960s, but the ones from the 1970s, when I was born, there are at least thirty of these I have got to use." And on it went. The piles grew, but no scanning yet. He broke for lunch.

Then came the film. "Old 8 mm film is really beautiful, isn't it?" he thought. "My parents are going to love this part when I had my first little swimming pool. Wow. I'll just transfer it all, and then make my selections tomorrow during the edit." Despite a few glitches in the camera, he eventually got it right, and by 4 pm, the video was recorded on the camera. He thought about taking notes about which sections were on his two-hour tape, but since he was having so much fun reminiscing he never got around to it.

"I have to find the right music—old show tunes and stuff. And I need a few archival images, and I bet I can find that stuff on the Internet." After dinner he got online, and around 11 pm his eyes grew tired and his hand had gone numb. But he had everything he needed—just all in one big folder on the computer.

Rick woke up in the middle of the night and opened his eyes. "...The part where they are looking out over the Grand Canyon ... I can cut to a shot of me digging myself into the sandbox when I was three. That will be so cool. I can't wait to start."

The next day, he scanned his images, played with Photoshop, and he captured so much video on his computer that he ran out of hard drive space. He played with his morphing software. He did everything but start on the story. Sunday evening came and it was still a big mess. The workweek was a nightmare, so he only had a few hours to actually edit.

When the event approached on Saturday, the best thing he came up with was an extended music video, fourteen minutes long, with whole sections of images, film and titles bumping, flipping, and gyrating for reasons unknown. Several of his parents' friends fell asleep during the showing, and at the end there was a spattering of applause. Rick attributed the reaction to the heaviness of the gravy on the chicken stroganoff that was served at the dinner.

His mother, of course, cried through the whole thing.

His father, always supportive, thanked him, and said, "Rick, that was, well, really … interesting."

Digital stories have an advantage over film production—you are often using available material at the core of your project as opposed to creating all-new footage. But as our story shows, the material itself can be profoundly compelling for the storyteller, particularly if it is a first visit in a long time. But without a script, and an idea of how the story is told, composing a digital story can overwhelm the best of us.

Rick's tale is the worst-case scenario for the digital storyteller: So much wonderful content and so many cool tools to play with, but so few ideas for how things will actually come together. We have met many people that have had symptoms of these obsessions, and in our workshops, we work to try and gently bring them back down to earth. We affirm that the material might seem irresistible, but we encourage students to write a first draft and complete a bit of storyboard work prior to diving into their family's photo archive.

Professional filmmakers use the storyboard as a critical production manage-ment tool, saving countless hours of experimentation by avoiding non-essential material.

We want to encourage our participants to reach for their highest level of organization to maximize the precious time they have to create their stories. For many of our workshop participants, life may give them only a few such opportunities to really mine the archive for the critical stories of their lives. But we want to honor all different kinds of creative processes. For some, time is not so extravagant a luxury. If you can afford to excavate your archive completely, to fully examine the creative palette of multimedia tools, and to work through a series of drafts of your project to make a highly polished piece, the rewards are worth the effort.

Making a Storyboard

Our reference here is from a tutorial developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling in 1999 called *MomnotMom*, and is based on a reflection by staff member Thenmozhi Soundararajan. The specific section that we refer to below consists of a title, six photographs, and a short video clip. The soundtrack is a nice piece of guitar music. We've laid out the storyboard on the following page.

Notice how few words of the voice-over are under each picture. Each line takes about six to ten seconds to speak. In general, three to four seconds is about the ideal length for any still image to appear on the screen. If it's too short, then it's hard for the viewer to recognize what's being shown; too long, and boredom sets in. If you're laying out your storyboard and find lines and lines of text under any one picture, rethink your script or your images.

Can the script be cut down, and can the image be left to fill-in for the missing words? If the text remains long, can more than one image illustrate the essential words? You may also want to use some effects to extend the viewer's interest in a single still image. But for now, try to use the best effect of all: letting images speak for themselves, and using words to say the rest.

Some Ways to Make Your Storyboard

1) Get a piece of posterboard, preferably large (22" x 17"), and a packet of Post-it notes. Sort out the image material you plan to use and label each of the Post-it notes with the name and, if needed, a phrase describing the image.

2) Create five or six horizontal rows across your posterboard, leaving room for writing text below each Post-it. Fill in the text of your script in pencil, and place the appropriate images above the appropriate words. The Post-its will allow you will allow you to move things around or take them out as need be and you can erase the text if you want to move it around.

3) Instead of labeling Post-its with the name of each image, you could go to a copy place and photocopy your photos. Tape or glue your copied images to the Post-its, and lay out your storyboard. The advantage here is that, just as on the computer, you can easily move things around.

4) If you'd like to work on a smaller page, photocopy the blank storyboard template on the next page or visit *storycenter.org/cookbook.html* and download the .pdf file.

5) If you are familiar with desktop publishing software like QuarkXPress or Adobe's PageMaker, or you know how to layout tables in Microsoft Word, and you know how to scan images, you can make your storyboard right on the computer.

Any of these methods will work. Do whatever is convenient and easy for you. A storyboard will speed up your work in many ways. It can show you where your voice-over should be cut before you record, and it may help you to determine if you have too many or too few images chosen before you begin scanning. Storyboarding is a valuable tool, and it can also be fun. Get others to join you in your storyboarding process and make it a collaborative project.

Images

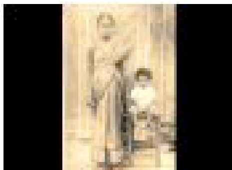
Effects: Fade In — Image Pan — Image Pan — Image Pan — Image Pan

Transitions: Cross Dissolve

Voiceover: There is a picture of my mother that I always keep with me. It is a curious photo, because in most photos I always imagine that people pose for the future, but in this time, this moment, this photograph I feel like she is searching for her past.

Soundtrack: Fade in guitar chord progression

Images



Effects: Alpha Channel Motion

Transitions: Cross Dissolve — Cross Dissolve — Cross Dissolve — Cross Dissolve

Voiceover: Across oceans and between cultures, I think back to who she was as a girl, a young woman, a doctor, a wife,

Soundtrack: guitar chord progression