

WRITING AND REVISING A DIGITAL STORY SCRIPT

Drafting

Overview

Some people immediately know the story they want to tell. Others discover an idea in the drafting process. Either way, you should approach drafting with an open mind – often the story you first think you will tell is not the one you end up telling.

These 'rules' about scripts are good to keep in mind:

- Digital story scripts are typically 350-450 words. Your final, revised script should be within this range, definitely not exceeding 450 words. If your script is longer than this, the story will likely be tedious to watch, no matter how good the content. The difficulty of video editing is also directly proportional to the length of the script.
- Let action – descriptions of things happening – drive your story, rather than reflection and/or summary.
- Give some attention to the images you'll use in your story, but don't worry too much about images in the early stages of drafting.
- Don't let these rules constrain you in drafting. It often takes a good bit of messy and longwinded drafting before you figure out what you want to say. It's also fine to come to a begin with a draft that's too long: a longer draft with a beginning, middle, and end can be easier to shape in revision than a shorter one that hasn't yet taken any shape.

Generating Ideas

TIMELINE

Spend 20+ minutes drawing a timeline of your life, which plots everything you can remember – homes, relationships, important events, trips, births, deaths, education-related events, jobs, community events, news events – on a timeline stretching from birth to the present. It's helpful to begin by dividing the timeline into five-year chunks and first get down the most memorable stuff – births, deaths, graduations, etc. Then, you can begin to scour your memory for less obvious, but still important moments.

NOTE: If you're working with a group of storytellers, it's useful to review these timelines together; often the discussion will help everyone think of additional material for their own timelines.

LISTING

Listing is a good idea-generating strategy. With this technique, you are given three or four prompts and asked to list brief responses under each. The aim is to generate a range of possible story topics, hopefully in the process getting unstuck and stimulating some interesting memories. Here are some good listing prompts:

- List 3-5 places important to you becoming the person you are today.
- List 3-5 people important to your life or outlook on life.

- List 3-5 events that have played an important role in your outlook on life.
- List 3-5 things (i.e., items, stuff) that have been important to you over time or during certain times in your life.

FREEWITING

After you have a good set of potential story topics, you can move to more formal drafting. One structured way to proceed is as follows:

1. Circle three promising items in your lists.
2. Select one of the three and 'freewrite' about this event without much attention to story structure and grammar for 10-15 minutes.
3. After the time is up, 1) continue the first freewrite, 2) start a new freewrite on another circled item, 3) select a compelling new idea that arose during the first freewrite and do a second 10-15-minute freewrite on that idea, or 4) choose 1-3 and try the "index-card" method described below.

INDEX-CARD WRITING

This method is simple: draft a story using only the front and back of a 4x6 index card. Try to fit a story with a beginning, middle, and end on the card alone. Do this in ten minutes.

Revising a Script

Getting Feedback in a Story Circle or Script Workshop

A Story Circle can be done before or after drafting begins: it's a chance for each storyteller to talk through ideas they have for their script. When you have developed your first draft, it is time to sit down with a trusted reader or readers for feedback. In a group workshop, facilitators typically lead a formal peer feedback session known as the Script Workshop.

Foremost, the Script Workshop is the time to "listen deeply," as StoryCenter says, honoring the courage it takes to write a personal story and share it with others.

It is also the time to get feedback and bounce ideas off of one another. Typically, each person reads their script aloud, and then sits quietly while the group gives about 10 minutes of feedback. After listening to the group's feedback, the storyteller has a turn to ask questions. Others in the Script Workshop can often help identify the heart of a story, along with what needs to be edited out and further developed.

Considering Story Structure with Freytag's Triangle

Freytag's Triangle (Fig. 1) is a visual aid that represents the components of shapely stories, as well as the proportion of the overall story arc typically filled by each component. Stories that lack shape can often be usefully reorganized using this tool.

Freytag's scheme has the writer begin with conflict, spend most of the story complicating that conflict, and bring the conflict to a climax quite near the end of the story. There is then a very brief bit of falling action that ends with a resolution.

Most story drafts tend to be light on conflict and action, heavy on background information and reflection. The key challenge in revision is often **to find the conflict in the story and to dramatize that conflict by bringing the audience into a specific, high-stakes scene or time period.**

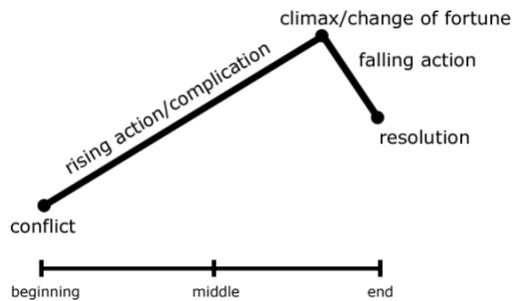


Figure 1. Freytag's Triangle

The ABDCE Tool

If you're trying to revise a story but having little luck, one helpful resource is the ABDCE tool (Fig. 2). The writer Anne Lamott described the ABDCE formula as follows in her book *Bird by Bird*, where each letter in the acronym stands for a structural part of a well-formed story:

A is for action: begin a story by throwing the reader into dramatic action or unresolved conflict that makes her curious to read on.

B is for background: after pulling the reader in with action, step back and give the important background information about the main characters and the history preceding the opening action.

D is for development: keep further developing the conflict and tension of the story.

C is for climax, the turning point in the story, after which things are different, things are realized. A climax is often dramatized or shown through action.

E is for end, the point at which you interpret the meaning of the story.

The grid in Figure 2 can be a useful tool when you're trying to reorganize a first draft into a more compelling story structure. **Use the column on the right to guide you as you cut-and-paste sections of your first draft into the appropriate boxes. You may have to write some new content, too, and it's likely that not all of your draft content will fit.** Then, try to narrow each box down to about a paragraph—when you connect all of those paragraphs together, you should have a well-shaped story!

PART OF THE STORY	OVERVIEW OF CONTENT	CUT-AND-PASTED MATERIAL FROM YOUR DRAFT + NEW CONTENT
Action	Begin story by showing what’s at stake, either by describing a dramatic moment or presenting an unresolved question or conflict. Limit the length to a well-told paragraph.	
Background	After pulling the reader in with action, step back and give the important background information about the main characters and the history preceding the opening action.	
Development	Keep further developing the conflict and tension of the story.	
Climax	At about 80% of the way through the piece, reveal the turning point in the story, after which things are different, things are realized. A climax is often dramatized or shown through action.	
End	End by interpreting the meaning of the story. Don't belabor it.	

Figure 2. *The ABDCE Tool*

Working with Low-Literacy Storytellers

In your work with your nonprofit client, you may work with storytellers who cannot easily write and/or read a story script. In these situations, the process of writing a story gets more complicated and raises more ethical questions.

The primary advice is, first, use the storyteller’s *own words* whenever possible – techniques like taking notes during and even recording your brainstorming sessions with the storyteller and using some of their exact language in the draft can be helpful. Second, you should check back in with the storyteller throughout the process and ask specific questions about whether your interpretation of events in their story is correct.

Finally, be particularly cautious about endings: it’s very easy to put too neat or happy of an ending on someone else’s story.