



# How to Write True Stories

*Tips for Writing about Science, Research, and Climate Issues*



# Overview

- Why Tell Stories?
- Why Now?
- Components of Writing a Story
- How to Write the Story: Take Aways

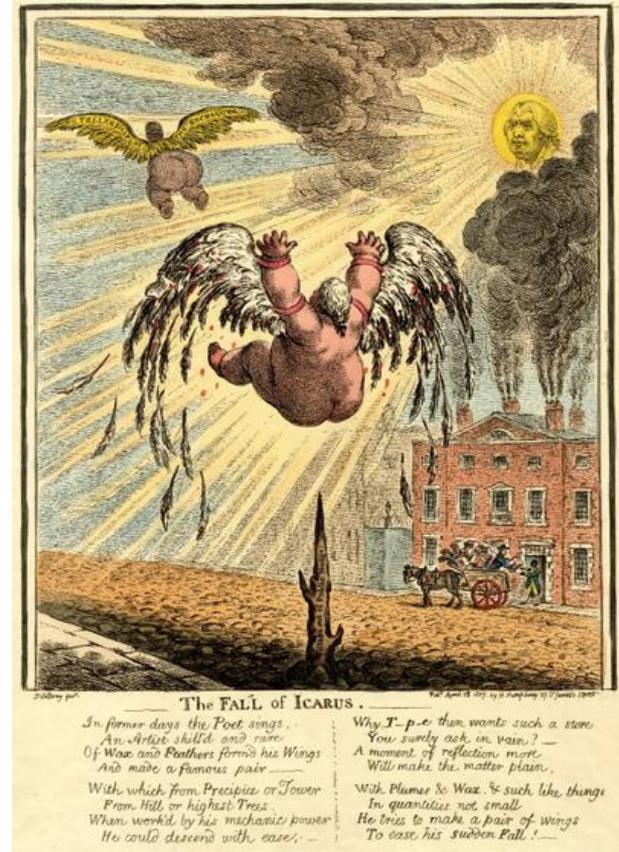
*Also Resources for Deeper Dive | Pixar's 22 Rules for Phenomenal Storytelling*

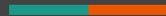


# Why Tell Stories?

*We're hard-wired to recognize and respond to story.*

- Fables and myths told over and over with new characters.
- Girl faces incredible odds and big obstacles. Girl finds something within. Girl achieves what she never thought she could.
- Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy gets girl back.
- Beginning, Middle (Conflict), End (Resolution).





Research backs this up:

Character-driven stories encourage the release of oxytocin, a sort of warm-and-fuzzy neurochemical that signals that “it is safe approach others.” It is “produced when we are trusted or shown a kindness, and it motivates cooperation with others.” (Zak 2014)



## What's in it for Us?

- Helps our audiences with **sensemaking vs. information overload**.
- Offers personal experiences as **testimony to "gray" areas of life vs. polarization and false equivalences** in today's news.
- Brings **human-scale to global-scale problems**.



# Fits Climate Communication Best Practices

**Table 1.** Overview of Key Psychological Lessons and Policy Advice

Psychological lesson	Policy guideline	Example policy recommendation
1. The human brain privileges experience over analysis	Highlight relevant personal experiences through affective recall, stories, and metaphors.	The National Park Service (NPS) gives concrete examples of how climate change has already harmed natural resources in specific parks.
2. People are social beings who respond to group norms	Activate and leverage relevant social group norms to promote and increase collective action.	Government climate science agencies could improve efforts to highlight descriptive norms (e.g., the scientific consensus on human-caused climate change).
3. Out of sight, out of mind: reduce psychological distance	Emphasize the present and make climate change impacts and solutions locally relevant.	NASA and The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are supporting efforts to enable TV meteorologists to educate their viewers about current local climate change impacts.
4. Nobody likes losing but everyone likes gaining	Frame policy solutions in terms of what can be gained (not in terms of what is lost).	The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) "Clean Power Plan" focuses on cleaning up the nation's fuel supply, which will help clean up the nation's air and water, providing direct health benefits to all Americans.
5. Tapping the potential of human motivation	Leverage intrinsic motivation to support long-term environmental goals.	The President, Congress, and all federal agencies should be openly aspirational in designing climate policy initiatives that tap into citizens' deeply held motivations for building a better tomorrow.

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# Step 1: ID your Primary Audience

- 01 | Who are they?
- 02 | What are they likely to know already?
- 03 | What values do you share? Differences?



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## Step 2: What do you want them to take away?

- 01 | What do you want them to know?
- 02 | SO WHAT if they don't read your article?

ANSWER: If my reader fails to learn about specific main point, they will miss the opportunity to understand-know-gain-realize key takeaway about my subject.



Photo: Katie Tegtmeier

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## Step 3: Gather Your Components

- 01 | Background Information: Documents, Past Coverage, Interview Transcripts/Notes
- 02 | ID your standout Quotes & Anecdotes
- 03 | Outline Main “Characters” and Points You Want to Make (5W’s & How)

*Component Approach: Tony Rogers*

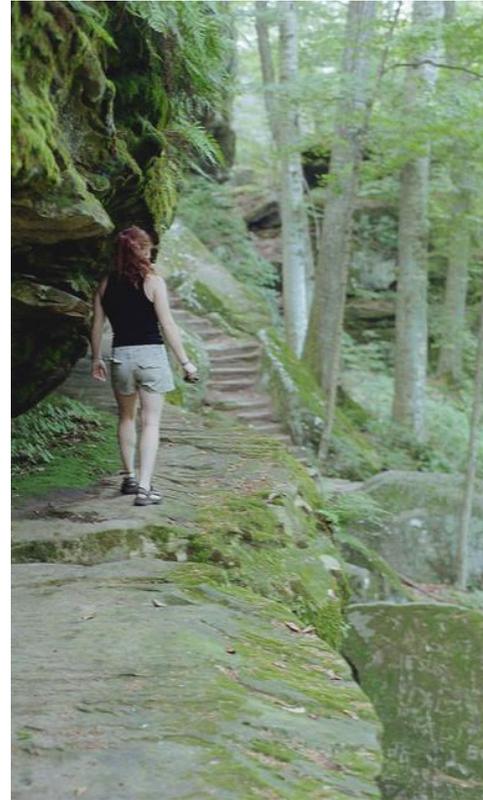


Photo: Katie Tegtmeier

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## Step 4: Assemble Your Story

- 01 | A Great Beginning or Lede
- 02 | Description and Main Points
- 03 | Quotes & Anecdotes
- 04 | Conclusion



Photo: Katie Tegtmeyer

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# How to Write a Great Lede

1. Look for a Change in Status Quo
  - Something is new to conventional thinking, understanding
  - Something has changed
  - Something or someone is going against the grain





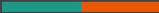
A Great Lede: Change in Status Quo

Arthur C. Clarke is best remembered as Stanley Kubrick's partner in the creation of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a cinematic landmark in visual and technocultural storytelling. **However**, his most enduring legacy, lives in his six-decade career as a science fiction and popular science writer. (*New perspective on conventional thinking.*)



## A Great Lede: Change in Status Quo

A new analysis suggests that far less forest was destroyed in Africa during the 20th century than previously estimated -- some 22% in the continent's tropical regions, compared with earlier estimates of 35% and 55%. (*New perspective on conventional thinking.*)



## A Great Lede: Change in Status Quo

Many of the groups protesting President Donald Trump's move to dramatically downsize two national monuments in Utah see a threat to today's landscapes and ecosystems. One group, **however**, fears for the distant past: the rich fossil record to be found in the colorful strata. (*Someone going against the grain.*)

Other possible pivot words: **now, today, but, for the first time**



# How to Write a Great Lede

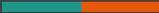
2. Tell Me a Story
  - Scan your quotes, anecdotes, background material for natural stories.
  - Look for the person who can be a main character or the subject you can personify.





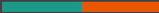
## A Great Lede: Tell Me a Story

The story of a family of microbial proteins that are toxic to plants started **in an unexpected way.** In 1995, Bryan Bailey (of the US Department of Agriculture) was studying fungi that could be used to destroy coca plants (which are used to produce cocaine). (*Outright tip to a good story about to be told.*)



A Great Lede: Tell Me a Story

When Dia--Eldin Elnaiem flies to Sudan next month, it will be with a light heart. **For the first time** in 2 decades, he will be able to study disease-carrying sand flies in the nation of his birth without fear of breaking the law of his adopted country, the United States. (*“Character” headed on a trip, change of status quo.*)



A Great Lede: Tell Me a Story

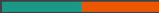
Robert Kelman first tried rock climbing in 1971. He thought was unwise to do something so dangerous, but his son, then 12, had pushed to go, so he signed them both up for a weeklong class in Banff National Park, in the Canadian Rockies. Climbing, as it turns out, didn't grab his son, but Kelman was hooked. (*Story with a plot twist.*)



# How to Write a Great Lede

3. “Thaw” your who, what, where, when, & how





## A Great Lede: Thaw your 5 W's

This advice comes from editor Rick Zahler at *The Seattle Times*. The traditional version of **the 5W's freezes those story elements into informational ice cubes**. If you **thaw them out**, the narrative begins to flow. Who becomes Character. What becomes Action. Where becomes Setting. When becomes Chronology. Why becomes Motive. How becomes Narrative.

--Roy Peter Clark



## Description in Your Story

- Use concrete words (“banana” rather than “fruit” or “thing.”)
- Use active verbs.
- Identify your main “characters” and make them do the action.
- Set a scene.
- Use shorter rather than longer sentences when possible. Mix it up.





# Quotes & Anecdotes

Identify your standout quotes and anecdotes. Weave them into your story.

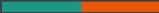




## Conclusions -

- Don't let your story peter out. End decisively.
- Don't introduce new information or ideas.
- Do look toward the future or next steps.
- Do give your reader a sense of wrapping up.
- Consider using a summarizing or thoughtful quote from your research to end.





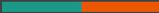
## How to Conclude a Story - Example Final Sentences

The authors say that future tree-planting efforts should be focused in west Africa, where the most forest was lost, rather than farther east in the savanna, which has its own biodiversity and also supports cattle.

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## How to Conclude a Story - Example Final Sentences

(Arthur C.) Clarke's approach and his message remain relevant today.



## How to Conclude a Story - Example Final Sentences

“Maybe your next goal,” (Kelman’s wife) said, “is just to keep climbing as long as you can.”



# Resources

[5 Key Components of Cooking Up Great Feature Stories](#) by Tony Rogers. ThoughtCo. 2017.

[How to Tell a Great Story](#) by Carolyn O'Hara. Harvard Business Review. 2014.

[How to Write a Good Story in 800 Words or Less](#) by Roy Peter Clark. 2003. The Poynter Institute.

[Improving public engagement with climate change: Five “best practice” insights from psychological science](#) by Sander Van der linden, Edward Maibach, and Anthony Leiserowitz. Perspectives on Psychological Science. November 2015.

[Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling](#) by Paul J. Zak. Harvard Business Review. 2014.

[Yale Program on Climate Communications](#)



Jereme Rauckman

# Bonus Slide Pixar's 22 Rules for Phenomenal Storytelling

**EMMA COATS @LAWNROCKET**

**PIXAR'S 22 RULES**

**1** YOU ADMIRE A CHARACTER FOR THEIR SUCCESS. **TRYING** MORE THAN FOR AS A WRITER.

**2** YOU GOTTA KEEP IN MIND what's interesting to you as an **AUDIENCE.** WHAT'S FUN TO DO AS A WRITER. THEY CAN BE VERY DIFFERENT.

**3** TRYING FOR THEM IS IMPORTANT, BUT YOU WON'T SEE WHAT THE STORY IS **ACTUALLY** ABOUT TIL YOU'RE AT THE END OF IT. **NOW REWRITE.**

**4** **ONCE** UPON A TIME THERE WAS... Every day... One day... BECAUSE OF THAT, BECAUSE OF THAT, **until finally**

**5** **SIMPLIFY. FOCUS.** Combine characters. **OVER DETOURS.** You'll feel like you're losing valuable stuff BUT IT SETS YOU **FREE.**

**6** WHAT IS YOUR CHARACTER GOOD AT, COMFORTABLE WITH? **THROW THE POLAR OPPOSITE AT THEM. CHALLENGE THEM.** HOW DO THEY DEAL?

**7** COME UP WITH YOUR **ENDING** BEFORE YOU FIGURE OUT **your middle.** Seriously. Endings are hard, get yours working up front.

**8** **FINISH YOUR STORY,** *let go* even if it's not perfect. IN AN IDEAL WORLD **DO BETTER NEXT TIME.**

**9** WHEN YOU'RE **STUCK.** • MAKE • A • LIST • OF • WHAT • WOULDN'T • HAPPEN • NEXT. LOTS OF TIMES THE MATERIAL to get you **unstuck** WILL SHOW UP.

**10** **PULL APART** THE STORIES YOU LIKE. WHAT YOU LIKE IN THEM IS A PART OF YOU; you've got to **RECOGNIZE IT** BEFORE YOU CAN USE IT.

**11** **PUTTING IT ON PAPER** LETS YOU START FIXING IT. IF IT STAYS IN YOUR HEAD, **a perfect idea,** YOU'LL NEVER SHARE IT WITH ANYONE.

**12** **DISCOUNT THE THING** THAT COMES TO MIND. AND THE **obvious** get the obvious out of the way. **SURPRISE YOURSELF.**

**13** Give your characters **OPINIONS.** PASSIVE / MALLEABLE might seem likeable to you as you write, but it's poison to the **AUDIENCE.**

**14** **WHY MUST YOU TELL this? STORY.** What's the belief burning within you THAT YOUR STORY FEEDS OFF OF? THAT'S THE HEART OF IT.

**15** If you were your character, **IN THIS SITUATION, HOW WOULD YOU FEEL?** **HONESTY** LENDS CREDIBILITY to unbelievable situations.

**16** WHAT ARE THE STAKES? GIVE US **REASON TO ROOT** FOR THE CHARACTER. WHAT HAPPENS IF THEY DON'T SUCCEED? **Stack the odds against.**

**17** **NO WORK IS EVER WASTED.** IF IT'S NOT WORKING, LET GO AND MOVE ON - IT'LL COME BACK AROUND TO BE USEFUL LATER.

**18** YOU HAVE TO **KNOW YOURSELF.** the difference between doing your best and fudging. **STORY IS TESTING, NOT REFINING.**

**19** COINCIDENCES TO GET characters into trouble are great; **COINCIDENCES** TO GET THEM OUT OF IT ARE **cheating.**

**20** **EXERCISE:** TAKE THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF A MOVIE YOU DISLIKE. How do you rearrange them INTO WHAT YOU **DO like?**

**21** YOU GOTTA **IDENTIFY** with your situation characters, CAN'T JUST WRITE 'COOL'. WHAT WOULD MAKE **YOU** ACT THAT WAY?

**22** WHAT'S THE **ESSENCE** OF YOUR STORY? MOST ECONOMICAL TELLING OF IT? IF YOU KNOW THAT, YOU CAN BUILD OUT FROM THERE.

**WALL-E**

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# Thank you!

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