



## **STORYTELLING FOR USER EXPERIENCE**

Crafting Stories for Better Design

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So far in this book we’ve discussed *why* and *when* to tell stories in UX design. Now we are going to focus on *how*. No matter how short the story, careful construction is critical.

The idea for a story may arise spontaneously, offered to illustrate a point or answer a question. Or you may plan a story in advance as part of a report or presentation. However you discover the story and whenever you use it, your goal is always the same: You want the story to make a point. The work of crafting a story is aimed at ensuring that the story communicates what you intend and is not misunderstood.

Now it is time to turn our attention to how to craft a story. In the rest of the chapters, we will look at the following elements of a story and how you can use them to make your stories more engaging (and more effective).

The information in these chapters draws on theory and guidance for any kind of story, but is just as relevant for a user experience story. For example, you may not think of yourself as a performer, but when you tell a story to a group, that’s a form of oral storytelling. Your user experience stories may not be plot-driven adventure stories, but they describe actions, giving them a structure and plot.

The elements of a story we will explore in detail are:

- **The audience:** Who is the story intended to reach?
- **The ingredients:** What does the story have to include?
- **The story structure:** How should the story be structured?
- **The medium:** How will the story be told?

## What do we mean by “craft”?

“Craft” is a tricky word. It can refer to the skill it takes to make something or to an occupation requiring manual dexterity or skilled artistry. It can refer to skill in deception, but has also been used to mean the end result of skilled work, such as masterful writing. All of those meanings apply to storytelling in user experience design—except the part about deception,

of course. (See Chapter 4, “The Ethics of Stories,” if you have questions about authenticity and deception.)

These stories are created for a purpose. They are not primarily about *self-expression*, but this doesn’t mean that they shouldn’t be eloquent, fun, or engaging.

Think of a user experience story as a basket. Baskets have a purpose—they are a container to hold things. The first evaluation of a basket is whether it does its job well. But a master basket maker goes beyond function to make a basket that is not only useful, but beautiful. When a basket maker knows how to create beautiful baskets over and over again, that’s craft. Similarly, learning the craft of storytelling will help you repeatedly create effective stories. As you practice telling stories, you can aim to become a master (UX design) storyteller, creating better and better stories.

## Stories get better with practice

Crafting a story is an iterative process. You write a first draft, try it out, refine it based on feedback, and try it again. After Kevin taught a workshop at a storytelling conference for the first time and told an example story at the end, a wise, old storyteller named J.G. “Paw Paw” Pinkerton came up to him.

“Nice story, young man,” he said. “You know, you don’t really know a story until you’ve told it a hundred times.” What? A hundred times? That’s ridiculous! But Kevin later realized that J.G. was right. Perhaps the number is a bit arbitrary, but stories get better with practice, whether they are intended for performance or design. The more you tell a story, the better the story becomes, and the more comfortable the teller becomes at telling it. Also, the more you tell a story, the more you can subtly (or not-so-subtly) adapt it to new audiences and situations. These opportunities allow you to see new dimensions in the story, and as J.G. said, the more you’ll understand it.

You probably won’t work that hard on every story you use. Some will be quick improvisations, but others will develop into workhorses of your repertoire, stories you can tell over and over again. “I have a repertoire of

stories that I've built up over my years of design practice," Tom Erickson writes. "I collect them. I write them. I tell them. I piece together new stories out of bits of old ones. I make up stories about my own observations and experiences. I use these stories to generate discussion, to inform, to persuade."

To tell good stories, you have to work at it and be willing to adapt.



#### EVEN CLOWNS WORK AT CRAFTING THEIR STORY

One year while I was working as a lighting designer for the Big Apple Circus, the show included a famous clown, a top star of the one-ring European circus, with an act that was completely different from the red-nose, physical humor of American clowns. His first night, he bombed. The kids just stared at him with no laughs and hardly even a giggle. All of us working with the circus all waited for the tantrum, for the star to blame the audience. Instead, the next morning, while we were working on the lights, he brought his trunk into the ring and quietly rehearsed. That night, he got a few laughs, and over the next days he continued to work, changing some bits, dropping some, and adding new ones. By the end of the week, he was getting the big laughs and the applause. He didn't do it by abandoning his style of clowning, but by listening carefully to the audience and learning how to speak to them. —"When the Show Goes On," Boxes and Arrows: [www.bboxesandarrows.com/view/when\\_the\\_show\\_must\\_go\\_on\\_its\\_time\\_to\\_collaborate\\_or\\_die](http://www.bboxesandarrows.com/view/when_the_show_must_go_on_its_time_to_collaborate_or_die) ■

## Sometimes stories fail

We've stressed that anyone can create stories. We've focused on ways to successfully use stories in user experience design. But, much as we hate to admit it, sometimes stories fail. Sometimes, no matter how much you work on a story, you just can't get it right. Maybe it's you. Maybe it's the audience. Maybe it's a good story for the wrong audience. Maybe the point you are trying to make simply isn't meant to be made in a story.



#### THE STORY THAT FAILED

After I came out of the closet as a storyteller at Motorola, they decided that I should be responsible for crafting the use cases for my department's research technologies.

I would do version after version of these use cases, and I thought they were terrific. They went beyond “Susan doesn’t know how to use her phone, so she hit the OK button and it works.” There was motivation. Characters need a reason to pick up the phone—if there’s a problem a user needs to solve and it doesn’t make sense to pick up a phone to solve that problem, then it doesn’t do any good to have a solution on the phone.

So I would write these brilliant use cases, and they’d say, “Nah, it doesn’t work for us.” OK, I thought. I’ll try a different flow, add some more data and structure. “Nah, didn’t work.” Then I tried a series of different variations in a row. Still didn’t work. I tried adding more of the technical aspects of the use cases, giving them a multidimensional feel. “Nah, It’s a little long.” Long? It’s one or two paragraphs. “Yeah, it’s a little long. We’re not going to read that.”

So what would work? I asked. “Two sentences.” Should I take out the punctuation so it looks more like PowerPoint? I wondered. Would that make them feel more comfortable and familiar? I was shocked. ■

It would be easy to get angry. Kevin put a lot of work into trying to make stories work. But they didn’t. He tried different ways of using stories, and he probably improved the stories as he worked on them, but they just didn’t work for that audience, period.

All we can say is this: Know when to leave it behind. A good story will resurface when the time is right.

## Think carefully about your goals

User experience stories should not be random anecdotes or simple jokes to make the audience laugh. Imagine that you’ve had a rough flight on your way to a meeting. As you start your presentation, you are still annoyed, so you try to work it into an amusing story. It seems to work. The audience laughs. The problem is that unless that story illustrates a point-of-pain relevant to your project, reinforces data from your user research, or makes some point about your user experience goals, it won’t really help your presentation. Even worse, if you haven’t thought carefully about the story, it could backfire, contradicting your point or distracting the audience with a lingering mental image that makes them ponder the story’s relevance and pay less attention to you.



### Think carefully about your goals

Like any design, creating a story starts with having a clear goal. User experience design stories are created for a specific audience and purpose. You might need a story that helps a researcher see and feel the user's perspectives a little more clearly. Or your goal might be to show a development team the relative advantages of different design solutions and how they balance user needs against business goals. Or perhaps your goal is to inspire a design team to think creatively about a new problem space. To be effective in each of these situations demands a story crafted to make a point to a specific audience.

## Summary

The final section of the book is focused on *how* rather than *why* or *when* to use stories in user experience design.

- The work of crafting a story is aimed at ensuring that the story meets your goals, communicates what you intend, and is not misunderstood.
- Creating a story requires practice and a willingness to iterate the story until it works.
- Stories sometimes fail, and you have to let the story go and find a different way to communicate.

The next chapters look at the elements that go into creating a story. It starts with the audience, includes ingredients like perspective, characters, context, imagery, and language and covers structure, plot, and the way you tell the story.