

Developing & Writing Stories: Some Tips

All of us our writing for different reasons, with a variety of content and for a range of audiences – but regardless, there are some common components and challenges that we all face: making our content interesting, making our readers care about what we're saying and getting the maximum strategic value from our work.

The following are a few suggestions from the Cities of Migration team:

Elements of a good story:

- A good story: entertains as it informs
- A good story has some conflict or hurdle and then a resolution
- A good story leaves the reader with something of substance (time well spent)
- A good story is one you enjoy writing – since that will show!
- A good story shows and doesn't tell
- A good story is a sticky story which means that your reader has something that they can pass along to others
- A good story contains an element of surprise or unexpected

7 Suggestions for a Strong Story...

1. Talking Helps Your Writing: So Do It Early in the Process

- Since we often think it is more useful to have a definite project or product to share, we often wait until we have a draft or maybe an outline before we get our colleagues or team involved in the writing process.
- Don't. It is more useful to have their input early – while you are still choosing an angle to focus, deciding how the structure your story etc.

2. Know the Point and the Purpose: Why Are You Doing This?

- Before you start, ask yourself: Why are you writing this? What is the goal or purpose that you are trying to accomplish with this piece of work?
- Be very clear about this since it will shape and influence: the voice, the style, the structure and the content that you focus on

3. Who Cares? Knowing and Writing to Your Audience

- Who is your reader and what do they need to hear to have this matter to them? And then to have them read on and take the action that you want them to have

4. You only Have a Sentence (or Two): To Make a First Impression

- A strong hook is essential: based on your audience what can you offer up right away that will grab their attention?

- A strong hook captures the essence of this story as well as offering something more: a stat, a human interest story, something unexpected or quirky
- **Tip:** UK tabloid press does this really well: www.dailymail.co.uk yes really.
- **Tip:** It also helps to identify and track your competition so you can distinguish your product from other projects – through your voice, style, spin and look.

5. What's the Form?

- Are you writing this for the web? For a pamphlet? For the paper?
- You need to consider the actual form that the content will be presented in.

6. Sex It up: Details Matter

- What can you add to your draft to make it more exciting and interesting?
- Small details can make a big difference. Give a person a name. A building a color, a child an age – its all helps.
- Also: what role will pictures, layout, multi-media have in making this more interesting to read?

7. Rewrite, Re-read, Repeat

- Where possible – give yourself time. Getting writing you like means: rewriting.
- Also time away from the draft makes a big difference.
- **Tip:** Editing is not about you! Unless you are writing your memoirs, try not to get personal about your writing, it makes editing a much easier and more open process (for both you and the rest of your team).

Related Resources:

The Ten Immutable Laws of Storytelling

http://www.agoodmanonline.com/pdf/free_range_2007_06.pdf

How to find good Stories

http://www.agoodmanonline.com/pdf/free_range_2005_12.pdf

What is Public Narrative? Marshall Ganz, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard

<http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~mganz/Current%20Teaching/What%20Is%20Public%20Narrative.3.8.07.doc>

Capturing Ideas: Dos and Don'ts / Charles L. Owen, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology:

<http://www.bpminstitute.org/articles/article/article/capturing-ideas.html>

Why bad ideas are a good idea / Alan Dix [et al.]:

<http://www.idc.ul.ie/hcieducators06/Procs/dix.pdf>

The Guardian. Councils told to avoid jargon words: Writing Advice:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/jun/20/localgovernment.localgovernment>

Good Ideas: Where great enterprise comes from, and how it grows: <http://www.notrain-nogain.org/list/lau.asp>