

THE PERFECT STORY

How to Tell Stories that
Inform, Influence, and Inspire



KAREN EBER

A PDF COMPANION TO THE AUDIOBOOK

The Perfect Story

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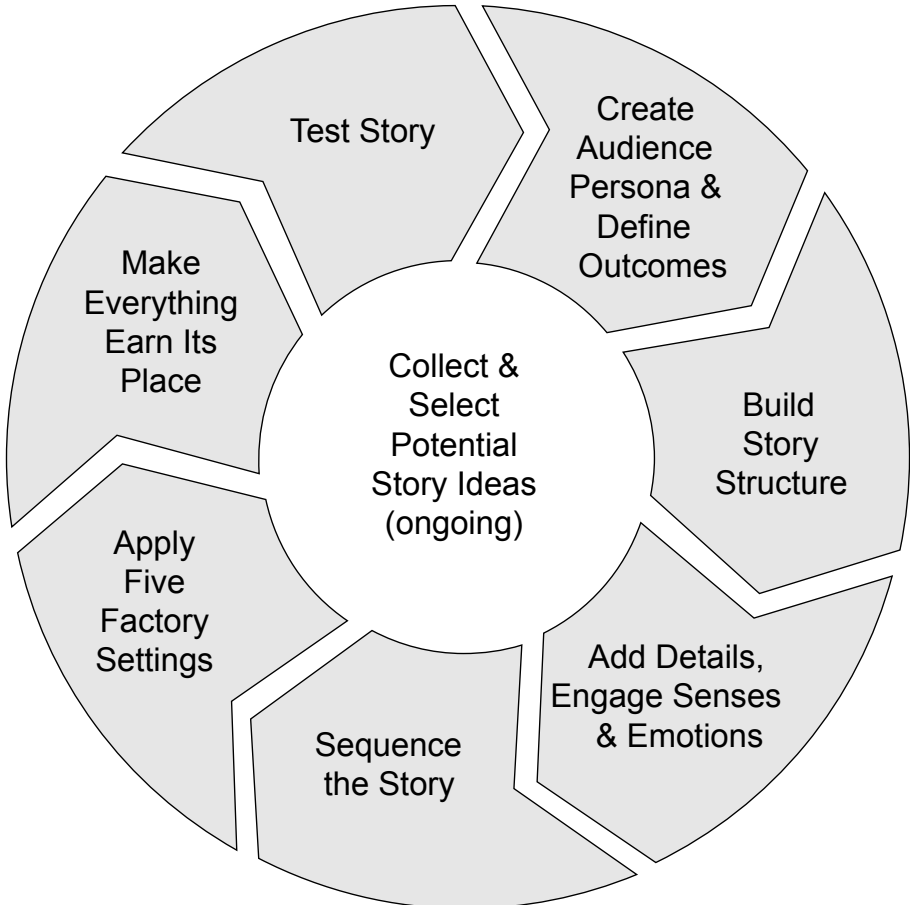
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Storytelling to the Rescue

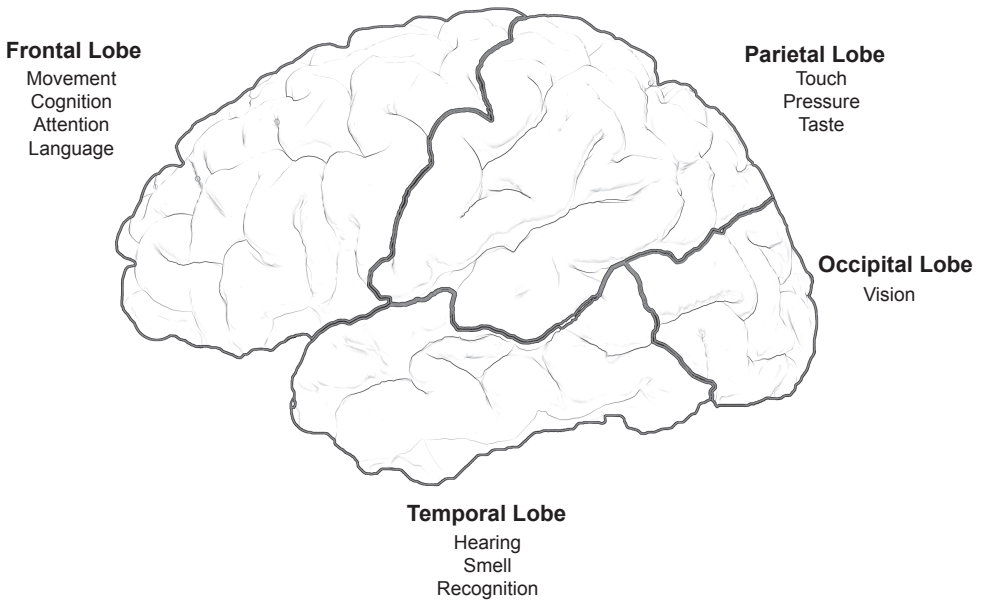
THE STEPS AND MODEL FOR BUILDING A GREAT STORY



T W O

What Happens When You Tell Stories?

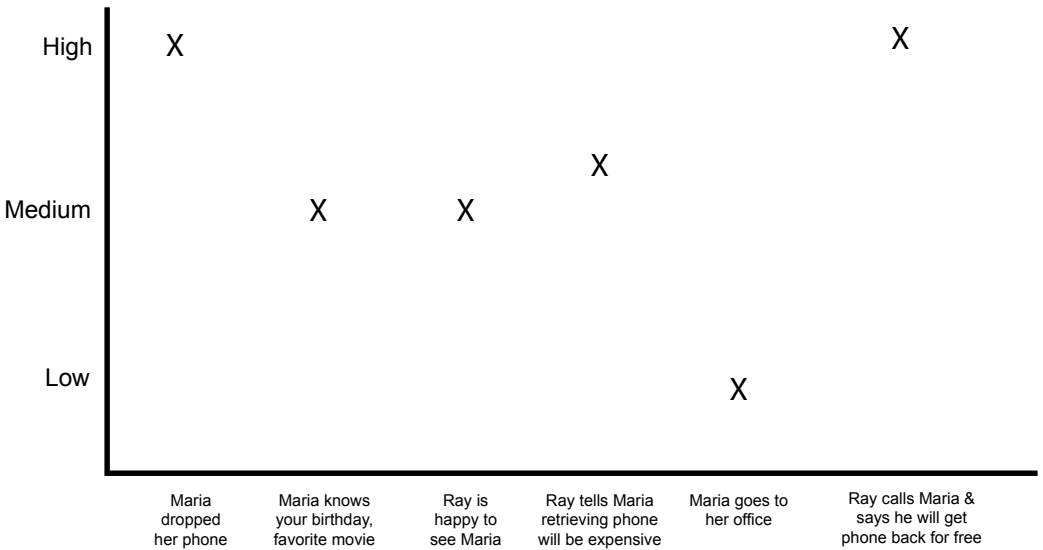
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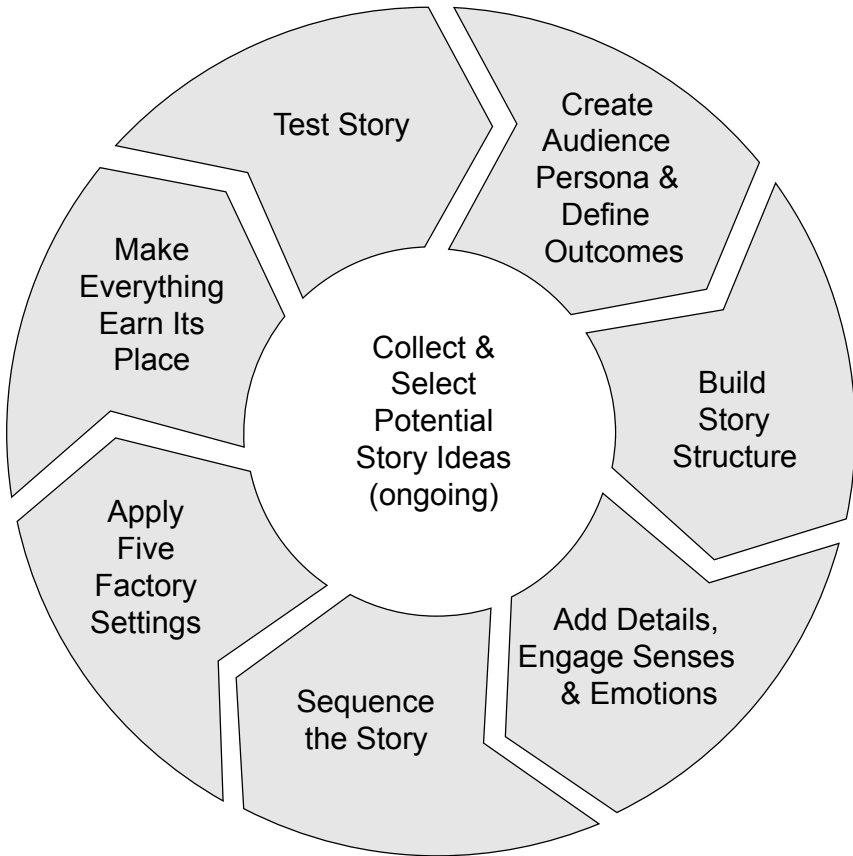
F I F T E E N

How Do I Know If My Story Resonates?

MARIA'S OPENING STORY ENERGY GRAPH



Checklists



DEFINE YOUR STORYTELLING APPROACH CHECKLIST

- **How do you find your best ideas for stories?**

- ☐ Ask yourself a question and go for a walk.
- ☐ Interview other people.
- ☐ Seek out conversations.
- ☐ Dig into client testimonials or feedback.
- ☐ Review questions that commonly come from clients/customers.
- ☐ Look at pictures (on your phone, online searches, stock photo websites).
- ☐ Search online.
- ☐ Visit experiences in the world (museums, movies, performances).
- ☐ Find articles, books, podcasts.
- ☐ Talk with a muse.
- ☐ Other: _____

- **Where will you capture potential story ideas?**

- ☐ Notebook
- ☐ Online tool/app
- ☐ Spreadsheet
- ☐ Post-its
- ☐ Other: _____

- **When you build out a story, do you:**

- ☐ Discuss it with someone?
- ☐ Start with an outline?
- ☐ Write it out in its entirety?
- ☐ Create a bulleted list of key points?
- ☐ Say it aloud and record it?
- ☐ Use visual aids to support your story?

STORYTELLING PROMPTS CHECKLIST

- **Personal Experiences**

- ☐ What was a defining event in your life?
- ☐ What was a situation that didn't start funny, but you laugh about it now?
- ☐ What would do differently if you could?
- ☐ When did you have an adventure on vacation?
- ☐ What pets did you have growing up?
- ☐ Do you have a hidden talent?
- ☐ Who was your favorite teacher?
- ☐ What was your first concert, car, or date?
- ☐ Have you had a car breakdown? What did you learn?
- ☐ What would you save if your home was on fire?
- ☐ What is the best advice you've received?
- ☐ What is a skill or talent you mastered?
- ☐ What traditions were observed in your home?
- ☐ What is something you should have thrown out but can't part with?
- ☐ Ask a friend or family member:
 - What is your favorite thing about me?
 - What was I like as a child?
 - What did you imagine I would do for a living?

■ Professional Experiences

- ☐ What was your first job?
- ☐ What was a mistake or failure you learned from?
- ☐ What was a difficult team or project you experienced?
- ☐ What change made you afraid of losing or gaining something?
- ☐ Who was your best or worst leader?
- ☐ What is a moment where you thought, *This is why I do this work!*
- ☐ When was a moment when you had no idea what you were doing?
- ☐ What is something you would like to do over?
- ☐ What would you tell the younger version of yourself?
- ☐ What are you most proud of?
- ☐ What is the best advice you have received?

■ Clients, Customers, Stakeholders

- ☐ What problems do your customers face? What do they complain about?
- ☐ What do your clients aspire to be, do, or have in the future?
- ☐ What are the pain points you have solved for your customers?
- ☐ What do customers love about your product or solution? Why?
- ☐ What do your customers think of you?
- ☐ Which of your customers' challenges would you find if you searched online sites? (search engines, stock photo sites, social media)
- ☐ What have you learned from the evolution of your product or solution?
- ☐ What are the ten principles or ideas your customers need to know?
- ☐ Why did you launch a particular product or service?

■ Find a Muse

- ☐ What would make someone your ideal customer?
- ☐ What problems do they struggle with?
- ☐ How have you helped them, and what did they realize in the process?
- ☐ Where have they had success?
- ☐ What comes easily to them?
- ☐ Where are they looking to grow?
- ☐ What aspirations do they have?

■ In the World

- ☐ What is a favorite movie or piece of art that moves you? Why?
- ☐ What music (an artist, song, or genre) can you play endlessly?
- ☐ What topics can you talk about all day?
- ☐ What is an outdoor space you love to visit?
- ☐ Have you ever heard the origin of a product/company that stuck with you?
- ☐ Do you have a favorite museum?
- ☐ Is there an article or podcast episode that stood out to you? Why?
- ☐ What is your favorite city or place to visit? Why?
- ☐ Do you have a favorite book?
- ☐ Have you heard a speech or speaker that stayed with you?

■ Passage of Time

- ☐ Is there a conference room or building that's witnessed different meetings or events over the years?
- ☐ Did you have a stuffed animal, blanket, or piece of clothing that followed you on multiple experiences?
- ☐ What are objects that have evolved over the passage of time (e.g., rotary phone, cordless phone, flip phone, mobile phone)?
- ☐ Is there any object that has been passed down through your family?
- ☐ What are different world events your audience has witnessed over their lifetime?
- ☐ What is an object that could tell multiple points of experience? For example, my hiking boots are twenty-five years old. They represent many stories of the different hikes, trips to different countries, and life events.

■ Eulogies

- ☐ What do you admire about this person?
- ☐ When did the person do something that was “so them”?
- ☐ What is your favorite thing about this person?
- ☐ What is the funniest situation you saw this person in?
- ☐ If you could relive a day with this person, what would it be?
- ☐ What is a story about this person that no one knows?
- ☐ What was this person particular about—like food not touching on a plate?
- ☐ How did you meet this person?
- ☐ What holidays, vacations, or experiences did you share with the person?
- ☐ What’s a funny quirk about this person, like *always* taking a photo with a finger in the frame?

■ Wedding Toasts

- ☐ When did you meet the couple?
- ☐ What have you learned from the couple?
- ☐ What was the behind-the-scenes story of their engagement that most guests wouldn't know?
- ☐ What is your first memory of them individually or as a couple?
- ☐ How have you seen them grow as a couple?
- ☐ When did you know they were meant to be?
- ☐ What is an example that demonstrates who they are as a couple?
- ☐ Do you have a specific theme for the toast like “love” or “longevity”?
If so, what is a story about the couple that embodies the theme?

Job Interviews

- **Prepare for the interview**

- ☐ What do you know about the interviewer?
- ☐ What do you want the interviewer to know about you?
- ☐ Why are you the right one for the role (in-group)?
- ☐ What do you uniquely bring to this role or organization (out-group)?
- ☐ What assumptions might the interviewer have about you?

- **Tell me about a time . . . story prompts**

- ☐ Tell me about a time you faced conflict with a co-worker or team.
- ☐ Describe a time you made a mistake.
- ☐ Give an example of a time you demonstrated leadership skills.
- ☐ What is an example of when you had to reset expectations with a client?
- ☐ When did you have to think on your feet?
- ☐ Share a problem you have solved.
- ☐ How have you navigated a challenge?

Job Interview Story Structure

- **Challenge or conflict:** What was the problem or conflict you addressed? What was at stake? Why was this messy or hard? What would've happened if nothing had been done?
- **Outcome:** What action did you take?
- **Result:** What was the result of your actions?
- **Learning:** What did you learn?

STORYTELLING CHECKLIST

■ Define the persona(s) for your audience:

- ☐ What brings this group of people together to be your audience?
- ☐ What do they have in common?
- ☐ What is the average age of your audience?
- ☐ What is the education experience of your audience?
- ☐ What type of role or expertise do they hold?
- ☐ Where does your audience live?
- ☐ What hobbies does your audience participate in?
- ☐ What does a typical day look like for them?

■ What is the opportunity to tell a story?

- ☐ What do you want your audience to know, think, do, or feel differently?
- ☐ What idea or question will you explore with your audience?
- ☐ Do you want to bring your audience to experience discomfort, aspiration, or joy?
- ☐ Who are you OK disappointing with this story that isn't your target audience?

■ What is your goal in telling this story?

- ☐ Entertain.
- ☐ Inform/educate.
- ☐ Challenge or expand thinking.
- ☐ Influence, inspire, or motivate.

■ Picking an idea for a story to tell:

- ☐ Which idea builds what you want the audience to know, think, do, or feel differently?
- ☐ Does the idea create discomfort (seeing things that can't be unseen) or pleasure/aspiration (things we want to be, do, or have)?
- ☐ Does the idea help the audience feel part of or different from the group?

- ☐ Can you combine two ideas or compare one with the future?
- ☐ Does the idea change if told from a different perspective?
- ☐ Which of these are you excited to tell?

■ **Four-part storytelling model—write out a sentence for each:**

- ☐ *What is the context?* What is happening, why should the audience care?
- ☐ *What is the conflict?* What is the moment where something happens? What is the fuel for the story?
- ☐ *What is the outcome?* What is the result of the action taken?
- ☐ *What is the takeaway?* What is the overall theme and message?

■ **Make characters relatable:**

- ☐ What are the names of the major characters?
- ☐ What is important for the audience to know about their age or physical description?
- ☐ What should the audience know about the personality of your characters?
- ☐ Why are the characters in the story?
- ☐ What conflict do the characters face? Is it with themselves or with others due to circumstances, actions, or desires?
- ☐ How is conflict reconciled throughout the story?
- ☐ What are the emotions of the characters throughout the story? Do their emotions change throughout the conflict?
- ☐ How do the characters evolve across the story? How are they changed by the end?

■ **Details and senses:**

- ☐ What is the time and place of the story?
- ☐ How can you anchor details to what the audience already knows?
- ☐ Are there metaphors or comparisons you can incorporate?
- ☐ What are at least three specific details, like eating chocolate-chip ice cream.

- Engage at least two senses: help us see, hear, feel, taste, and smell what is happening.
- Show us what the characters are feeling.

■ What is the best flow for your story?

- *Linear*: beginning, middle, and end.
- *Flashbacks*: linear stories that pause and share a flashback that sets context before continuing.
- *Circular*: start and end at the same place (often “Conflict”).
- *Start at the end*: start at the end and go through the context and conflict.
- *Parallel story*: multiple stories sharing people, plots, or themes in common.
- *Change perspective*: stories told from the perspective of different characters.
- *Compare, Contrast, Imagine if . . .* : visioning or strategy sessions.
- What is the best perspective to tell your story from?
- How will you start your story?
 - Start with a question.
 - Start with a statement about the theme of the story.
 - Jump into the conflict.
 - Use the unexpected.
 - Appeal to curiosity.

■ Leverage the Five Factory Settings

- *Build and release tension*: include unexpected phrases, details, events, or order to minimize the lazy brain and assumptions.
- *Senses*: engage at least two senses.
- *Details*: include at least three specific details.
- *Emotions*: show the emotions the characters experience.
- *Library of files*: connect details and events to what people already know.
- *Relatable characters*: Do we understand why they do what they do even if we don’t agree with their actions? What changes do they undergo?

- *Pleasure/pain*: Does your story intentionally make the group uncomfortable or inspired?
- *In-/Out-group*: Does your story help the audience feel a part of a group or idea—or intentionally not part of it?
- *Pithy phrases*: Can you make the takeaway succinct?

■ **Make everything earn its place and test your story:**

- Does this move the story forward?
- Does this engage the senses?
- If it was cut, what would be lost?
- Does this create confusion?
- Does something need clarification?
- Does anything need to be added or removed?
- Can common phrases or details be replaced with specific ones?
- Where is the energy high in the story?
- Where does the energy dip?
- If you change the order of the story, does it impact the energy?

■ **Preparing to tell your story:**

- What is your opening sentence?
- What are your transition sentences?
- What is your closing sentence?
- What gestures can you use in your opening sentences?
- What gestures can you use to evoke emotions?
- When will you accelerate and/or slow down your cadence and inflection?
- Where will you pause around your key points to land ideas?
- Where else will you use pause in the story?
- Where do you want the energy high?
- Where do you plan to bring the energy down for a bit?
- Prepare your mindset:
 - Focus on building an idea for your audience.
 - Take on the excitement of a child wanting to show you something.
 - Tell yourself, “Have a conversation.”

STORYTELLING WITH DATA CHECKLIST

- **What is your opportunity to tell a story with data?**
 - Create mindset shifts, openness for exploration, and connect to deeper understanding.
 - Level set new audience or stakeholders on history, current status, and future focus.
 - Key decisions or milestones.
 - Inform insights about data (trends, outliers, unexpected results, further exploration).
 - Demonstrate scale.

- **What is the problem you are trying to solve?**
 - Ideally define this before collecting data. What problem are you trying to address, explore, or decide with the data? Frame this as a question.

- **What decision is needed?**
 - One time decision: *What is happening?*
 - Ongoing monitoring of trends and identifying outliers: *Why are things happening?*
 - Forward-looking, predictive, or informing strategy: *What might happen in the future? What should we consider next?*

- **Define your audience:**
 - What is their current understanding of the problem statement?
 - What is one thing you want them to know, think, feel, or do as a result of the data?
 - What are potential obstacles?

- **What is your recommendation about the data?**
 - What do you learn as you analyze the data?
 - What insights does the data provide?
 - What is important to know about the data?

- What is surprising or unexpected about the data?
- What do you recommend?
- Are you informing a decision or discussion?
- Define specific questions for the discussion or decision, if different from your problem statement.

■ **Identify the smallest amount of data:**

- What is the smallest piece of data you can share to inform your problem statement and recommendation?
- Within that data:
 - What problems are faced?
 - What pain points are experienced?
 - What happens if something is or isn't done?

■ **Find a story for the data:**

- *Tell a story about the data:* Tell a story about the smallest piece of data (e.g., person, team, organization).
- *Tell a parallel story:* What is an idea that aligns with the takeaway you want your audience to know, think, do, or feel differently? What stories can connect to the overall theme and outcome you want for the audience?

■ **Building the data story:**

- *What is the context:* What is the problem statement you set out to solve?
- *What is the conflict:* What are you seeing in the data? What is unexpected or surprising?
- *What is the outcome:* What is the impact? How does the data inform the problem statement?
- *What is the takeaway:* What is the recommendation? What happens if nothing is done?

■ **Data visualization:**

- Show one thought per slide/page.

- Don't rely on charts or graphs to tell the story. Pull the idea out of them. Use infographics.
- Use headers to guide the story and insights. Put supporting content in an appendix for reference.