

7 SENTENCE STORY STRUCTURE

A Storyteller's Guide

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This is a simple method to help you construct your story. You will use 7 sentences to define 7 distinct sections of your story. Each of the 7 sentences is worded in fairy tale-type language to give you a sense of what you're looking for; in effect, it is the foreword to each one of the 7 sections of your story.

Following each of those sentences, there is a short paragraph that describes what it is you should be looking for. That, in turn, is followed by multiple questions that illustrate the types of information (or answers) you'll be looking for to flesh out the body of your story. You don't have to find answers for every question, but the more answers (and information) you can come up with, the complete a story you'll have for your final project.

By doing things in this way, you will instinctively piece together all the excellent research that you've collected into a solid story: a 7-sentence structure. It's a straightforward way to effectively organize your hard work and ideas.

Before you get started, here is something important to remember. You always want to look for as many answers to the questions as possible. And an 'answer' can appear in many different shapes. An answer can be a description or a paragraph, of course. But an answer can also be a photograph, a chart, a map, a family tree, a graph, newspaper, a document, a video, a recording – it can be anything that tells your audience something that they didn't know before.

In fact, the more varied the types of answers you can find, the more interesting your story will be to read, watch, or listen to. And by all means, add your own questions and answers if you discover material that helps your audience get interested and involved. Answers should also be as detailed as possible. For example, if one of the questions is about where the subject of your story lived, don't be satisfied with the name of a place: give us as much detail as you can find about that place and what made it different from other similar communities. Describe it for us; give us a sense of what living there was like, and how it may have affected the course of your subject's story.

Follow these steps for each of the 7 sections, and your story will slowly assemble itself in front of your eyes.

For the purposes of this guide, I'll use the neutral "they" when referring to the main character or subject in your story, as opposed to continually writing "she/he." In a similar way, "they" can also apply to more than one individual.

1. ONCE UPON A TIME...

This opening sentence reminds us that your first responsibility as a storyteller is to introduce your character and the setting in which they live. Instinctively, your audience wants to know such things as: Who is the story about? Where are they? And when did this take place? You don't have to provide every conceivable detail, but you should supply enough information that the audience has all it needs to understand the story that is about to unfold.

- The central character of your story was born. When and where was that?
- What was their full name?
- Were they named after anyone in particular?
- If they had an unusual name, where did it come from? Why was it unusual?
- Who were their family? Their mother, father, brothers and sisters?
- Where did they live?
- How long had they lived there?
- Where did their ancestors come from – 1, 2, 3 generations (or more) before?
- Did they grow up in one place, or in several places? If there were several, why was that?
- If your story is about an event more than one individual, still try to feature three or four people. An audience enjoys a story more if they can see it from the perspective of a personality they might possibly recognize and empathize with.

2. A DAY IN THE LIFE

With your subject's identity and setting established, you need to begin to tell the audience what life was like in their everyday world. We are curious to know what things were like for them during the times in which your story takes place. That kind of detail is fascinating to everyone. We want to learn something about who your subject was: their personality, in other words. Ideally, you want to describe them in such a way that others can grasp a sense of what they were like.

Your subject went about their everyday life in the town/village/city/district where they grew up. What was daily life like there? Give as many examples as you can find. Think outside the box, and find ways to communicate this in a variety of ways (photos, newspaper clippings, anecdotes, and so forth.)

- What did their home look like at that time?
- What did the town/village/city/district they were from look like at that time?
- What were the important things in that town/village/city/district back then?
- What did their parents and other family members do to earn a living?

- What did they and their friends do for fun?
- Did they participate in any sports? Any known hobbies or skills?
- Did they participate in community events?
- Was religion an important part of their life?
- Were politics a part of their life? Or a prominent part of their small-town Canadian world?
- Did their parents, grandparents, or aunts, uncles and other family members, ever serve in the military? If so, where and when?
- Were there any other distinctive aspects to the family and how they lived their lives?

3. AND THEN ONE DAY...

Something happens. An incident, possibly a major one in your subject's world (such as war being declared, the death of a family member) that launches your subject into the story that you are about to tell. The incident throws your subject's world out of balance, forcing them to make a choice. Should they stay home and support their family? Or should they embark on some new path or action to try and restore balance in their world? Your audience wants to know as much as possible about what they chose to do and why they chose to do it. Here are some examples:

- The origins of the Spanish Flu are uncertain. Why is that?
- When did Canada acknowledge the crisis?
- How would your subject have learned about the Flu? When would they have learned?
- What did others in their family and social circle do when the news of the Pandemic became common knowledge?
- What were the general feelings in Canada about what was happening in the world at that time? Political events, culture, anything, as well as the Pandemic.
- What were the sentiments in small-town Canada about the Pandemic? How did they first deal with it? Examples help your audience imagine what things were like.
- Were there any other major incidents in your subject's life around that same time?
- What difficult decisions did they have to make? What choices did they choose to ignore?

4. BECAUSE OF THIS...

Your subject begins their long journey to dealing with the crisis that they are facing. If the crisis is sickness, what do they have to do to deal with it? If it's war, then what are their challenges in becoming a soldier and going into battle? If it's a family crisis, what changes and what are the obstacles and changes they face? This is the beginning of the main body of your story.

The subject of your story is transported in some way into a new situation or world, where they'll

have to learn everything from a new perspective. New rules, regulations, complications, traditions, and more. Along with this journey, your person encounters many challenging and ‘foreign’ routines and demands because their whole world is thrown out of balance in some way.

- If your subject’s critical event was the Pandemic, these are some of the questions you might ask:
 - How and when might they have first become aware of the Spanish Flu?
 - What was the primary source of information in the community in which they lived?
 - Did they take any precautions before the Pandemic impacting their world? Were there any options for them to consider?
 - Do you think they perceived the Flu as a serious threat to them personally?
- If your subject was in the military, these are some of the questions you might ask:
 - Why did they enlist when he did?
 - Did they enlist alone, or with friends or family? Why?
 - How did their family feel about them enlisting?
 - Why did they choose the branch of service that they eventually selected?
 - Did most young people from their community contribute to the war effort?
 - And whatever the crisis they were facing up to, do you think your subject was able to understand the implications of what they were getting themselves into? (Most of us don’t!)

5. NOT ONLY, BUT ALSO...

Your subject has reached or achieved their first objective. Much, if not all, will have changed for them. If they had goals, hopes, or fears that you can discover in your research, talk about them; show them. Such personal things will add depth and weight to their story. For example, did they have to leave loved ones behind? Do they have ongoing personal challenges that they wrestle with? In short, What Does Your Subject Want? Objectives are what will make your story exciting.

- Now that your person has begun their journey, what are the ongoing challenges that they face?
- How has their life changed, and does it continue to evolve?
- Have they moved to a new place geographically to deal with the challenges? What is the new place like, and how is it different? (Imagine the differences you might have encountered if your family moved, if you changed schools, or changed jobs. All these things impact us all.)
- If part of their journey was in the military, what was their training like? What were the conditions – the food, the sleeping accommodations,

- Did they travel elsewhere in the country? Overseas?
- What would that trip have been like?
- What were the living conditions where they went? Were they significantly different from what they'd known at home? In what ways?
- What was happening in the world at that time that would have had an impact on your subject and their immediate and extended family? Were there upheavals or changes that altered things forever?

6. THE TURNING POINT/MOMENT OF TRUTH...

We now are at your story's moment of truth. Your subject has been facing the hard realities of the challenge that they've undertaken. That means their personal objectives will have changed again. Their purpose is now more immediate and direct: How do I protect those that I love? How do I survive? If I don't do something, there will be terrible consequences.

Your audience wants to get a glimpse of what facing such a moment must have been like. What were they going through? What major decisions had to be made? What sacrifices? Anything you can offer about what your subject experienced during this Turning Point, or a Moment of Truth, will add enormously to the substance of your story. Any details and personalities will intrigue your audience, especially if there are surprising or unexpected turns of events. Everyone wants to know, "What happens now?!"

- What was the crisis? Lots of explicit detail so your audience can understand what it meant to your subject.
- Did others face the same crisis? Or was this unique to your individual?
- What action (or non-action) did your subject take in reaction to the crisis?
- What changes resulted from their actions?
- Did your subject return home? If so, what (if anything) had changed?
- If they were unable to return home, why not? What had changed?
- What had changed about your person?
- If they did not survive, what happened? What was the impact on their family?

7. AND EVER SINCE THAT DAY...

These are the closing scenes of your story. Your audience wants to see what your subject's journey meant to them, and to those close to them. From when we first meet your subject to this last encounter, what about them has changed and what brought about those changes? What lessons might have been learned? Imagine what impact this dramatic journey might have had on you. If your subject did not survive, talk about what other survivors might have experienced. Here are

some example questions to consider:

- If your subject settled back down again to everyday life, what would have changed for them? What would be different?
- Had life in their hometown/village/city/district changed since the beginning of your subject's journey?
- What did your subject choose to do for a living?
- What employment was available? Did your subject's experience affect what work they could do?
- Were they incapacitated in any way from their experience? Physically or mentally?
- What resources were available to support someone with such ongoing challenges?
- Did they marry and raise a family? If so, tell us who they were. And do any of them still reside in the same village/town/city/district?
- Did your subject ever talk about their experience?
- When did they die? Where are they buried?
- Are they remembered today? If so, how? Or have they faded from memory.
- What title would you use for your story about your subject's life?

Pulling it All Together

The answers you'll gather – lots of them – to the questions in each of your 7 sections will form the outline of your story. Keep walking yourself through the narrative – the storyline – of your subject's story using these 7 steps. Think of each of the 7 sections as points on a graph, which slowly rise as various events complicate and change your subject's life, reach a peak of the story, then settles back down as your story comes to its conclusion.

When you believe that you have sufficient material for each of the 7 sections, you're ready to begin laying out your story. Begin by sorting through all of your notes and research into these 7 sections. Keep putting the answers into logical or chronological order. If you find you have 5 pages for one section, that's a good thing: it's much easier to edit material down to fit in the really good stuff. You may start to see more clearly where there are small gaps in your story, so make a note of those gaps and try to bridge them with more details. The objective is to keep your story moving forward by keeping your audience engaged and curious.

However, if you don't have at least a couple of pages of material (notes, images, media) for each section, then you are going to need more ideas and material to fill out that section, and to make your story balanced and complete. Always be challenging yourself to ask more questions and get more information for the 7 sections. You'll be surprised at what you find, and where that search can take you.

What's important at this stage is to collect everything that you have discovered, pull it all together, determine how much material you have for each section, and make decisions about what parts still need some work.

For more tips and techniques about getting your research into shape, visit our [Creating Great Stories web pages](#).