

Writing and the Creative Life: Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling (Part 3)

[Scott Myers](#)

“Every storytelling exercise should begin by asking: Who is my audience and what is the message I want to share with them? Each decision about your story should flow from those questions.”



In [Part 1](#), we considered a Harvard Business Review article about the influence of stories on the brain, how much of it apparently boils down to the reaction of a chemical called Oxytocin.

In [Part 2](#), we considered additional chemical reactions in the brain related to storytelling: Cortisol during tense moments, Oxytocin which promotes a sense of connection to what is happening in the story, and Dopamine which makes us feel more hopeful and optimistic. So a new way of thinking about Three Act Structure:

Empathy [Oxytocin]: Establish a point of emotional resonance with characters.

Tension [Cortisol]: Create a dilemma that arouses disunity.

Release [Dopamine]: Resolve the dilemma that brings about unity.

Which leads us to another HBR article: [How to Tell a Great Story](#). Here are some tips:

Start with a message

Every storytelling exercise should begin by asking: Who is my audience and what is the message I want to share with them? Each decision about your story should flow from those questions.

Mine your own experiences

The best storytellers look to their own memories and life experiences for ways to illustrate their message. What events in your life make you believe in the idea you are trying to share?

Don't make yourself the hero

That said, don't make yourself the star of your own story. You can be a central figure, but the ultimate focus should

be on people you know, lessons you've learned, or events you've witnessed. And whenever possible, you should endeavor to "make the audience or employees the hero."

Highlight a struggle

A story without a challenge simply isn't very interesting.

"Good storytellers understand that a story needs conflict."

Don't be afraid to suggest the road ahead will be difficult.

"We actually like to be told it's going to be hard."

Keep it simple

Not every story you tell has to be a surprising, edge-of-your-seat epic. Some of the most successful and memorable stories are relatively simple and straightforward.

Don't let needless details detract from your core message. Work from the principle that "less is more."

Practice makes perfect

Storytelling is a "real art form" that requires repeated effort to get right. Practice with friends, loved ones, and trusted colleagues to hone your message into the most effective and efficient story. And remember that the rewards can be immense. "Stories are the original viral tool."

Since this is an article in the Harvard Business Review, the target audience is — obviously — business people.

However, I'm struck by how relevant each of these points is for screenwriters, television writers, fiction writers, nonfiction writers, basically all writers. For example:

- *Who is my audience?* One of the most fundamental

questions a writer can ask. As far as original screenplays go, this is a huge consideration for buyers because eventually, they have to *market* the project. And that means to specific target demos.

- *How can I make the script reader feel like the hero?* This goes back to a point I made in Part 1 about *audience identification*. One of our primary tasks as storytellers is to create an emotional resonance between the characters in our stories and readers. This is especially true when crafting and writing Protagonist characters for almost always, they act as conduits into the story for a script reader or moviegoer. If we can shrink that distance between reader and Protagonist, then they — readers — participate in the thrill of the Protagonist's exploits, living vicariously through them.
- *How can I imbue my story with conflict?* For some reason, people find conflict entertaining. Perhaps that is what lies at the core of the old writing adage: "There can be no drama without conflict." In my view, the best path here is through the characters. Determine their goals, their wants, their needs. Some may align, but most will not. Combine that with a compelling central narrative problem, particularly if generated by a Nemesis figure or dynamic, then you have a good foundation for conflict in your story.

Three great questions to ask as you craft your story.

For the rest of the article, go [here](#).

In Part 4, we explore how science has shown why character-driven stories are the most effective stories.

Writing and the Creative Life is a weekly series in which we explore creativity from the practical to the psychological, the latest in brain science to a spiritual take on the subject. Hopefully the more we understand about our creative self, the better we will become as writers. If you have any good reading material in this vein, please post in comments. If you have a particular observation you think readers will benefit from and you would like to explore in a guest post, email me.

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