

The 10 Immutable Laws of Storytelling

- Stories are always about people. To get into a story, we need to see people with whom we can identify, or who will serve as our guide through the landscape of the narrative. No matter what your subject or message, when you tell a story, the first question in the audience's mind is, "Who is this story about?"
- The people in your story have to want something. Once they audience knows who to focus on, their next question is, "What does he (or she) want?" Within the first paragraph or two, make sure it's clear what your hero desires and give your audience a reason to care about the outcome.
- Stories need to be fixed in time and space. Did your story happen last week or ten years ago? Are we on a street corner in Los Angeles, a village in Rwanda, or somewhere else? Help your audience get their bearings quickly so they can stop wondering about the "where" and "when" of your story and focus on the deeper meaning within.
- Let your characters speak for themselves. When characters speak to each other in a story, it lends immediacy and urgency to the piece. Audience members will feel as if they are the proverbial fly-on-the-wall within the scene, hearing in real time what each person has to say.
- Humans bore easily. Within the first few paragraphs, you have to make your audience wonder, "What happens next?" or "How is this going to turn out?" As the characters in your story pursue their goal, they must run into obstacles, surprises, or something that makes the audience sit up and take notice. In short: stories don't get interesting until "I want!" runs into "You can't!"
- Stories speak the audience's language. When telling a story, plain speaking is the order of the day. Good storytellers have a keen ear for the colloquialisms and local slang that quickly establish common ground between the teller and listener. In conversation, most people speak un-grammatically and in sentence fragments. In your stories, your characters should, too.
- Stories stir up emotions. Human beings are not inclined to think about things they do not care about. Stories stir the emotions -- not to be manipulative, not simply for melodramatic effect, but to break through the white noise of information that inundates us every day and to deliver the message: this is worth your attention.
- Stories don't tell: they show. Intellectually, your audience will understand a sentence such as, "When the nurse visited the family at home, she was met with hostility and guardedness." But if you had written instead, "When they all sat down for the first time in the living room, the family members wouldn't look her in the eye," your audience would have seen a picture, felt the hostility, and become more involved with the story.
- Stories have at least one "moment of truth." At their essence, the best stories show us something about how we should treat ourselves, how we should treat other people, or how we should treat the world around us. Since the first forms of humankind gathered around the first fires, we have looked to stories to be containers of truth, and your audience will instinctively look within your story for this kind of insight.

- Stories have clear meaning. When the final line is spoken, your audience should know exactly why they took this journey with you. In the end, this may be the most important rule of all. If your audience cannot answer the question, “What was that story all about?” it won’t matter how diligently you followed rules one through nine.

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