Implementing Good Storytelling in Your Exhibits

This webinar is based on national museum standards from the StEPs program offered by the American Association for State and Local History. StEPs is a self-study program created specifically for small- and mid-sized history organizations.

www.aaslh.org/steps

Plan for the Hour

- Define stories
- Learn basic elements of good storytelling
- Examine object-based methods by which stories might be better incorporated into interpretive exhibits
So What is a Story?

Pixar says it:
• “is a sequence of events … which unfolds through time.”
• connects and engages people on an emotional level

From Khan Academy, Pixar in a Box, The Art of Storytelling:
http://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/pixar

Defining Stories: Stories Have a (Specific) Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Version 1</th>
<th>Version 2</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I met a beautiful woman at a party. I shouldn’t have been at the party because it was at the house of someone who doesn’t like me. But the woman was beautiful. We married secretly. I killed someone and was banished. We both killed ourselves.”</td>
<td>&quot;I met a beautiful woman at a party. I fell in love at first sight – and she with me. But when I learned her name, she turned out to be from the family of my sworn enemies. Nonetheless, we married in secret. Meeting a group of my enemies in the market the next day, I got into a fight with one of them and killed him. Now I’m banished from the city and my wife is being pressured to marry someone else. Without telling me, she faked her death to avoid marrying another. When I discovered her body, I killed myself. When she awoke and found my body, she killed herself, as well.”</td>
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Defining Stories: Stories Have a (Specific) Structure

- Exposition (sets the scene, introduces main characters)
- Rising Action (conflict sets action in motion, increasing tension)
- Climax (the turning point)
- Falling Action (moving toward resolution, tying up loose ends)
- Resolution (all details & conflict resolved, normal/new normal going forward)
**Defining Stories: Stories Have a (Specific) Structure**

Exposition
- I met a beautiful woman at a party the other day. I fell in love at first sight – and she with me.

Rising Action
- But when I learned her name, she turned out to be from the family of my sworn enemies. Nonetheless, we married in secret.

Climax
- Meeting a group of my enemies in the market the next day, I got into a fight with one of them and killed him.

Falling Action
- Now I'm banished from the city and my wife is being pressured to marry someone else. Without telling me, she faked her death to avoid marrying another.

Resolution
- When I discovered her body, I killed myself. When she awoke and found my body, she killed herself, as well.

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**Anecdote vs. Story**

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**Histories vs. Stories**

"Histories tend to generalize events... Stories, on the other hand, begin on an intimate, personal level. Stories tend to heighten the unique traits and foibles of each character and, more often than histories, they get expressed in the first and second voice. This intimate view proves very accessible to those who otherwise claim to have little interest in history. Empathy is naturally felt by one person for another..."

- from “A Practical Guide to Personal Connectivity” by Daniel Spock
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Histories vs. Stories

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<td>“In the early twentieth century, when Italian immigrants first came to the United States, the jobs available to them were menial, low wage, and often dangerous.”</td>
<td>“On Thanksgiving night there was a real bad storm… [Uncle Filomeno] was called to go to work… I begged him ‘Don’t go tonight.’ … Well he insisted. He thought he had to go when he was called to go. And he went… Before you knew it… [my aunt] came up and said, ‘Something’s happened to Filomeno’ and that night he was sideswiped by a train. That’s the kind of work that they did, they had to go do this work.”</td>
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Histories vs. Stories

AN ANATOMICALLY INCORRECT DRAMATIZATION OF THE DANGER OF STORY

FACTS LIVE HERE

STORIES LIVE HERE
Tips for Telling a Good Story

Prepare

Keep it Simple
Show, Don’t Tell


Remain Aware of Your Audience


Be Flexible

Private Bruce L. Banks won this watch when he took first place in the mile relay race hosted by the YMCA in Paris on May 30, 1918. Banks served in the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I.
Fighting in World War I was a physically and mentally exhausting experience, and officers and enlisted men alike looked forward to escaping the front lines on leave to rest and recreate. More than 1.9 million Americans visited 26 YMCA-operated leave centers in France during the war. While serving in France for 18 months, Privete Bruce L. Banks visited a leave center in Paris in May 1918. While there he took first place in a one-mile relay race and won this watch, engraved with the date, name of the event, and the initials of the YMCA and the American Expeditionary Forces. He carried the watch with him throughout the war and brought it home with him in 1919. Despite surviving the horrors of war, Banks died of scarlet fever within a few years of returning home, while attending college at Fordham University.
Multiple Stories

Second storyline:

"The ad featured radium dial wrist watches, a tempting gift for servicemen, who could then read their glowing watch dials in the dark. The manufacture of these watches posed considerable health risks for young female workers at the United States Radium Corporation and the Radium Dial Company factories, who painted the tiny numbers on the dials. Dubbed "Radium Girls," the women were encouraged to lick their paintbrushes to keep the tips pointed, thereby ingesting fatal radiation doses. Radium paint was also used on the gauges of military instruments during the war."

Other Sources of Stories

• Lives of people who lived through the event
  • Oral histories, biographies, autobiographies
• Architecture
  • Who commissioned the building, and why?
  • Who designed it?
  • Who built it? From what materials?
  • Who lived in it?
  • Alternative uses?
• Community members
  • Local lore
  • Stories passed down through generations

Wrap-Up

Hopefully today you learned something about:

• What makes a story a story
• How to tell a compelling and engaging story
• How to develop stories from objects
Contact Information

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