

Storytelling versus writing

I am a huge Scandi-noir fiction fan. Recently, I was reading (yet again) a mystery by an Icelandic author (in translation, of course). I noticed the writing was a bit stilted. Some of the phrases didn't sound right, and I can only imagine this was a translation/translator issue. Translating is hard work. You need to understand the language, obviously. And you also need to understand author's tone and intent so you can choose the best word or phrase when many will do. This is especially true with colloquial expressions that don't translate directly. And I am sure these colloquialisms, and some peculiarities of Icelandic culture didn't quite make it in the translation. And yet there was a blurb on the book jacket by an American crime author, praising the Icelandic author, saying she was a "magnificent writer." I doubt that the American read the work in the original Icelandic, so she had no way to judge the writing. What she was judging, and rightly so, was the *storytelling*.

Storytelling versus writing

Good storytelling is not the same as good writing, and neither is good writing also good storytelling. Writing and storytelling are two different, albeit related, skills.

Good storytelling pulls you in. It makes you want to know more.

Good writing is about knowing how to use language and its mechanics to communicate ideas clearly.

Can you have one without the other? Yes, you can. And I would argue that the best stories are also the best written.



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Think about your favorite book

If you've ever read a book with an intriguing plot, but with utilitarian writing, you understand that storytelling is a skill separate from writing. Books written by good storytellers who are mediocre writers are readable because you are interested in the story and you want to know more.

If you've ever read a book that's so well written, where the words sing, but there is no discernible plot or the story being told is boring, chances are you stopped reading or read the book super slowly. Beautiful writing alone does not make a readable book.

And I would bet that your favorite books, the ones you recommend or perhaps even re-read, are the ones that have a great story and are well written.

Here's the bottom line for content writers

For those of us who write any sort of content, focusing on *what* we are trying to say should come first. Then, we should think about *how* to say it. If we get both these elements—storytelling and writing—done right, we'll create content worth reading.

Don't let your story go off the rails

A disjointed lecture

On Monday night, I attended a lecture put on by a local

education nonprofit. The topic was interesting, and based on her biography, the speaker seemed knowledgeable. She started her talk by plunging the room into darkness and playing a video. Then, she got up and without preamble, started talking. She showed photographs of the subjects of her book, and talked about the people without context. She even brought up a guest who was related to one of the subjects in the book, and talked as if the room should know the person. The speaker barely talked about the subject of her lecture, making it the most disjointed and uninformative lecture I've been to in a long time.

Why so bad?

What went wrong? I am not sure what made the speaker give such a poor presentation. It could have been that she was having a bad night or that she hadn't prepared enough or that she's bad presenter.



Story time

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Always seek best practices

One thing I know for sure: This presentation could have been much better if the speaker followed the following storytelling rules:

1) Have a beginning, middle and end

Avant-garde cinema often plays with these elements (starting at the end, etc.), but in traditional (and clear) storytelling you start at the beginning and conclude at the end. That's a story arc that is easy to follow.

2) Don't make assumptions

When you are the expert, you may assume that everybody knows what you know. But that is not so. You have to fill in details and information for those in your audience you may not know everything there is to know about your subject.

3) Focus

It's easy to meander when telling a story. There are also sort of side stories and interesting details about your main topic. But before you can go down a side path, you have to clear the main path. In other words, focus on the main story before you start telling tangential stories.

Bottom line:

Sure, there's more to effective story telling than this. But before you embellish a story, start with the basics.