

Guide for Story Clubs

Hello, and welcome to Story Club!

You've made a smart choice by devoting time to sharpen your storytelling skills. Practice is where progress begins for all storytellers. You don't need to be a super hero to tell great stories. You don't even need to be a creative person or natural born storyteller. All great storytellers have mastered a common set of tools. All you need to do is practice this skillset and apply them in your business environment.

Let the Story Do the Work gives you the full context for when and how to incorporate storytelling when you connect, influence and persuade others. The book gives you many options to practice storytelling on your own, including templates, advice and examples. It doesn't just feed you stories, it teaches you how to tell them yourself!

Using this Story Club Guide alongside *Let the Story Do the Work* will train you, over the course of four weeks, to tell brief and brilliant stories aimed at a variety of audiences and purposes. It will also set you up to receive targeted feedback from your group.

Here is how your Story Club will work best:

- Gather three to four friends or colleagues.
- Complete the individual prep work and debriefing exercises provided in the Guide for Story Clubs (this will take about 1 hour per week).
- Get together for four 90-minute sessions (once per week) to work through the group exercises in this guide, using *Let the Story Do the Work* and additional resources provided for the week. If you don't have a full 90 minutes, don't worry! Decide as a group which exercises will benefit you the most, focus on those, and cut the week's exercises you don't have time for.

As Jeff Bezos recently told the online publication *Airows*, "You can have the best technology, you can have the best business model, but if the storytelling isn't amazing, it won't matter. Nobody will watch." Here's to a great four weeks spent honing the most important skill of the 21st Century!

I'd love to hear how storytelling has benefitted your business and career. Connect with me:

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Week 1: Structuring and Telling Your Story

Before Story Club:

1. Read over:
 - pp. 11-17 on the principal elements of storytelling
 - pp. 23-43 on the five basic plots for business storytelling
 - pp. 155-169 on structuring stories about yourself.

I also highly recommend watching Kurt Vonnegut's video on the Shapes of Stories on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP3c1h8v2ZQ>.

2. List five of the most important presentations you have given, meetings you have led, and/or one-on-one interactions you have engaged in over the past four to six months.

Then, reflect on the following questions:

- What did you do to prepare?
- What communication structure did you use?
- How did your audience respond?
- What action, if any, was taken in response to your presentation?

Prepare to share your reflections at your Story Club meeting.

3. Identify an upcoming assignment or opportunity in which you will need to **convey important information**. What stories would benefit your communication? Jot down a list of the stories that come to mind—whether personal or stories others have told you.

4. **Assignment:** Select the story that best fits the occasion and draft your story. Prepare to share this during your first Story Club meeting. (Refer to p. 33 for guidance on the drafting process.)

During Story Club:

1. (20 minutes*) Discuss your reflections on your past communications, pinpointing current strengths and opportunities for growth:
 - a. What actions do you hope people take based on your communications, and how can you close the gaps between what you want and what actually happens?
 - b. How could a different structure benefit your communications?

2. (40 minutes) Turning your attention to the upcoming assignment or opportunity you identified during your prep work, share the drafts you wrote.

Process: Share one story at a time, and discuss the questions in the headings on pp. 33-35. Work together to determine the type of plot that best suits what the

story is about, who the intended audience is, and how the lead character has changed.

3. *(15 minutes)* Individually, rework your story using one of the templates on pp. 36-43 as a guide (feel free to go beyond the template as you add details).
4. *(15 minutes)* As you read the reworked stories aloud in your group, work together to identify the beginning, middle, and end of the story. Does the story follow the three-act structure outlined on pp. 11-15? Identify opportunities for creating an even more intriguing beginning, riveting middle, and satisfying end.

*Please use these time breakdowns as a suggestion, not a hard-and-fast rule.

After Story Club:

Reflect on what you observed during the meetings. Ask yourself:

- What does the group seem to find most challenging about structuring their stories?
- How successfully did each of the group members create a hook that grabbed your attention?
- Is there anything you noticed about the structure of the stories that you did not feel comfortable commenting on?
- What do you especially want to work on in your own story?

Revise your story based on the feedback you received, paying particular attention to how you are planting the hook (see pp. 13-15).

Week 2: Knowing Your Audience

Before Story Club:

Read Chapter 3. Identify an upcoming meeting/ presentation/ conversation where you will need to **persuade someone** either to make a change or accept an impending change. Using this situation as your example, work through steps 1 and 2 on p. 58.

During Story Club:

1. *(10 minutes)* Discuss: Who is the audience you most need to persuade? Describe them, based on your prep work.
2. *(15 minutes)* Read your current script for persuading your audience. Then, explain the current state and desired state of your audience.
3. *(15 minutes)* Discuss what you know and don't know about your audience, based on your prep work on Step 2 (p. 58).
 - a. Ask others to help you add to what you know and don't know about the impending change—and what your audience knows and doesn't know. (If they are not familiar with the details of your upcoming change, they can draw on their experiences with other changes they have experienced professionally and personally--for instance, as customers.)
4. *(50 minutes)* Using the information you prepared by working through steps 1 and 2, focus on improving one "act" of the three-act structure at a time.
 - a. *(5 minutes)* **Discuss:** What's in the Venn diagram (from Step 2 of your prep work)? What is the number one thing your audience needs to know (and that you are able to tell them)?
 - b. *(15 minutes)* **Reshape:** Look back at your script. Is there a clear Act I? Have you used it to acknowledge your audience's current state? Use Glenn Hollister's story on pp. 53-55 as your guide. Notice the way Glenn *shows* his audience that he understands them without saying anything explicit like "I've put myself in your shoes." Reshape Act I to show your audience that you understand them.
 - c. *(5 minutes)* **Discuss:** What mindset do you hope your audience will reach as a result of your persuasion?
 - d. *(10 minutes)* **Reshape:** Looking back at your script, is there a clear Act II—a riveting middle? (In this case, what will rivet your audience is knowing how this change will help them.) Reshape Act II to inspire your audience to envision how different their lives will be if they accept what you are offering them.

- e. (5 minutes) **Discuss:** What do you want your audience to *do* after listening to you?
- f. (10 minutes) **Reshape:** Does your script include a satisfying ending? In this case, it should convince the audience to *reach* for something—to aspire to greater efficiency, to broaden their impact, to deal more personally with customers, to build a better product, or whatever else. Look closely at Act III and make sure it is asking your audience to *aspire*.

*Please use these time breakdowns as a suggestion, not a hard-and-fast rule.

After Story Club:

Seek out someone who shares the most similarities with your target audience (or who is particularly good at imagining themselves in someone else's shoes). Read your script and ask them the questions on pp. 168-169.

Week 3: Collecting Stories

Before Story Club:

Read Chapter 7. Reflect on several one-on-one interactions you have had during the past week. Estimate how much time you spent **listening vs. talking**. What do you remember others telling you? How did you indicate your interest? When and how did you acknowledge the person you were talking with?

Think back over the past two or three months. What were some of the main topics you had conversations about with your colleagues?

- a. List them.
- b. Circle the topics that could benefit from a point of view other than your own. (Chapter 7, pp. 130-133, explains reasons you might seek out another perspective.)
- c. Consider:
 - i. What are these topics?
 - ii. Why would a different point of view be desirable?
 - iii. What do you hope to gain from seeking someone else's perspective?
- d. List the people who could provide this needed perspective on each topic.

For additional resources on listening, read “What Great Listeners Actually Do,” (<https://hbr.org/2016/07/what-great-listeners-actually-do>), and watch Celeste Headlee's TED Talk, “10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation” (https://www.ted.com/talks/celeste_headlee_10_ways_to_have_a_better_conversation).

During Story Club:

1. (55 minutes) Collect stories from the other members of your Story Club in order to mine stories the group has to share, to sharpen and practice your story-collecting savvy, and to enhance your ability to listen aggressively.

(10 minutes)

- a. Consider the aggressive listening strategies that are at your disposal (pp. 142-147). Write down at least one new strategy that you will try during this session.
- b. Each person should choose one other person in the Story Club to interview. (If you are a group of four, feel free to pair off.) Choose five categories from the “Crazy Good Questions on pp. 137-8 that are best suited to the person you will interview.

(15-20 minutes per interview; 45 minutes total.)

- a. Use your five selected Crazy Good Questions as a guide to draw out your interviewee's stories. Take turns interviewing each other.
- b. Rather than using these five questions as a script, feel free to improvise, elaborate, mix and match.

2. (5 minutes) Write down the most interesting stories you told your interviewer. Then, write down the most interesting stories you *heard* when you were the one doing the interviewing. Compare your lists with your interview partner. Do the interviewer and the interviewee agree on which stories were the most interesting? What can this tell you about how we view our own stories?
3. (20 minutes) Seek feedback about your “aggressive listening.”
 - a. Decide what you most want feedback about. (For instance, your body language as you listened; your ability to improvise and think of follow up questions; your ability to ask clarifying question and/or paraphrase [see p. 145], or the level of curiosity and respect the interviewee felt.) **Set parameters so the person giving the feedback knows exactly what you want feedback on.** The person giving feedback should point to specific actions and phrases that helped or hindered the interview.
 - b. Listen and take notes on the feedback you receive. Resist the urge to defend yourself, but do feel free to ask clarifying questions to make the feedback more useful.
4. (15 minutes) Discuss: How will you use your own stories that you discovered through the interview? Also, discuss whether or not you would like to give your colleagues permission to use the stories you shared.

After Story Club:

1. Ask yourself the following questions:
 - a. What did you learn about yourself as a listener?
 - b. What did you learn about yourself as an interviewer?
 - c. Of the feedback you received, which points were the most helpful?
 - d. What did you notice about the process of being interviewed? When did you feel the most valued or listened to? What did the interviewer say or do to make you feel this way? (Pinpoint specific phrases or actions.)
 - e. What are the most important takeaways about listening and asking questions? How will these shape the way you interview others?
2. Go back to the list of people you jotted down before Story Club—those who could provide insight on topics you frequently discuss. Make an appointment to talk with one of the people you identified. Use the Story Collecting method you’ve just practiced.

Week 4: Telling Stories with Data & Complex Information

Before Story Club:

Read Chapters 9 and 10.

What data does your organization need to share? How is this data currently being shared? (With words, visual elements, or both?)

Bring one example - in the way it is currently presented - to Story Club.

Answer the “practicing empathy” questions on pp. 74-76.

During Story Club:

Extra Materials Needed: Notecards.

1. (*10 minutes*) Introduce the data example you selected during the prep work. Briefly share your answers to the practicing empathy questions (pp. 74-76).
2. Discuss and reshape the way data is currently shared in the example each person brought. Most likely, the examples will not currently conform to a three-act structure, so you will work together to shape them into three acts.

Act I (*15 minutes*)

- a. **Discuss** the context for Act I:
 - i. What answers does your audience want?
 - ii. Why should they care about your findings?
 - iii. What should they do about your findings?
- b. **Reshape:** How can you share this data in a way that delivers the information the audience is waiting to hear, tells them why they should care, and prompts them to want to *act* on these findings? Rewrite the example based on these considerations.

Act II (*25 minutes*)

- a. **Discuss** the context for Act II:
 - i. What is the *context* of your answers/findings?
 - ii. What progress has been made?
 - iii. What was the intended outcome?
- b. **Reshape:** Start Act II by succinctly *reminding* your audience of the answers to these questions.
- c. **Discuss** the process you followed to arrive at these findings.
 - iv. Explain the process aloud to the group.
 - v. Then ask the Story Club, “What do you remember from what I just described?”
- d. **Reshape:** In the middle of Act II, you want to *recount* your process. But as you recount, adjust your description based on what your Story Club group remembered. If the right things didn’t stick, how can you rework

your explanation of the process so that they will? (Be sure to stay at a high level and save detailed calculations for the appendix.)

- e. **Discuss** how you see the project differently, after these findings. How can your audience do the same?
- f. **Reshape:** At the end of Act II, show how the situation can be *reframed* based on what you've found. See the graph on p. 55 as an excellent example of reframing. The graph invites the audience to reconsider the way they spend their time at work. Thus, it depicts the *impact* the findings will have, encouraging them to aspire to a more productive workday.

Act III (*15 minutes*)

a. Discuss:

1. What are the most important points from the beginning that you can loop back to in closing?
2. What actions do you want the audience to take?

- b. **Reshape:** Take another look at your ending. If it doesn't loop back to the most important points from the beginning and doesn't contain a clear call to action, reshape it.

2. Taking a closer look at your terms (Refer to pp. 90-94)

- a. (*10 minutes*) Consider the audience you identified as you answered the "practicing empathy" questions. What terms does your revised data story use that might be unfamiliar to them? Write them on notecards. If your Story Club is cross-functional, ask the other members to help you identify unfamiliar terms.
- b. (*15 minutes*) Choose one of the following exercises.
 1. **"Divide and Conquer."** Looking at the notecards with your terms, what categories begin to emerge? If you had to separate these cards into two different groups, what would you call each of the two groups? Try placing different terms side by side until you start to see what overarching labels you could give them.
 2. **"Unfamiliar Meets Familiar."** On blank notecards, write down common metaphor categories: health, weather, sports, relationships, household appliances and money. Pair up a metaphor card and a term card. Start to formulate a metaphor by saying, "{term} is like {metaphor category} because...." For instance, "Aggregated risk scores are like young people's aggregate health scores because each of these hides the problems associated with individuals." (See pp. 92-93).
 3. **"Say It In Pictures."** On each notecard that contains a term, see if you can depict the term using an icon. That icon can be your "way in" to explaining your term to a lay audience.

After Story Club:

1. Reflect on:

- a. What stood in the way of understanding the data others presented during the Story Club Meeting?
 - b. What did the Story Club members find most difficult about understanding your data? When did you observe “light bulb moments” as they began to understand your data? What does this tell you about what works well in data presentations?
 - c. How will you apply the data storytelling structure to upcoming data presentations?
2. What are the additional terms you find yourself explaining to customers, clients, cross-functional colleagues and others? Work through the Divide and Conquer, Unfamiliar Meets Familiar, or Say It In Pictures exercises for these terms.

Congratulations! You have almost completed Story Club!

To draw a full circle, take a few minutes to reflect on:

- What do you most look forward to applying from this four-week program?
- What did you find most challenging?
- What are three storytelling skills you still want to sharpen further?

I'd love to hear your reflection! Drop me a line at Esther@LeadershipStoryLab.com.

Here are additional resources to help you hone your storytelling chop:

- **Better Every Story.** A resource distributed monthly on principle, best practices and examples of great storytelling. Join us for [Better Every Story!](#)
- **Coaching. Training. Speaking.** Many of my clients mentioned how challenging it can be to come up with a good story. I hope you found effective tools from this program. If I could be of any help, please don't hesitate to [reach out](#)