

## **CHAPTER 1:**

# **TELLING A GOOD STORY**

When *60 Minutes* producer Don Hewitt explained the secret of the show's success, he wrote, "It's four words every child knows: Tell me a story," (CBS, 1999). (<http://cbs2.com/entertainment/don.hewitt.dead.2.1134964.html>)

Mass media writing is telling a good story *well*. Discussion of good stories begins with consideration of drama. In this book, I offer a "dramaturgical" approach to writing for mass media. **Dramaturgical** means incorporating a story in what we communicate. Regardless of the form of mass media we find ourselves writing in, telling a good story is the best way to connect with an audience.

Print media will be the first medium discussed in this book. We will start with straight news and then move to feature writing. It is essential that we tell a good *story*. Storytelling is also critical for radio writing. The book will then shift to visual mass media, television news, commercials, television dramas, documentaries, and feature films.

Thus, in this chapter we will discuss the necessity of the mass media writer to tell a good story. We will describe a model of drama, structural considerations, the role of a mass media writer as a storyteller, and characteristics of quality writing. Above all, the mass media writer must think like a dramatist.

### **DRAMATIC MODEL**

From the dawn of time, people have enjoyed and learned from a good story. We are either hard-wired to like a good story, or we learn to like them. The importance of stories to human communication is most likely a combination of both.

Storytelling is an intrinsic aspect of being human. It is an essential form of communication. When the first speaking, pre-historic, Cro-Magnon man came back to the cave with an antelope over his shoulder, and his fellows inquired with a series of

guttural grunts, “Wow, where’d you get the antelope?” He probably told them a good story. He told them about him being hungry, then the aim of getting some food for his family and the rest of the tribe. Then he talked about the complications, the trials, and tribulations: the weather was bad, his spear was dull, and he had to chase the antelope through the brush. But even in that story, there is a climax. He said, “I got the antelope! And I brought it back to the tribe, and now we’re all going to eat.” The essence of dramatic theory would likely have been present in such a story.

Our conception of drama was first articulated by the Greeks. Basic dramatic concepts can be found in Greek plays like *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex* by writers such as Sophocles and Euripides. The Greeks suggested the best way to communicate is to tell a good story. Our conception of drama has been honed through the history of civilization through stories shared orally, in theaters, in television writing, and in films.

Effective television commercials often communicate a good story. For instance, some of the home alarm system advertisements portray a dramatic scenario. The commercial features a family at their home. There is a father, a mother, and a young child or two. The father drives off for work that day and the mother and the children are left alone. All of a sudden, we have a big dramatic question: Is the house *really* protected? Suddenly a nefarious-looking thug kicks in the front door and there is a big scare! The mother frantically runs upstairs with the children. The mother locks the door and the telephone rings. On the other end of the telephone a professionally uniformed official says: “This is an Acme Home Security System representative. Are you safe?” The mother replies that they are safe. The representative confidently says he is sending security personnel to the home. You have a dramatic question. The woman in the spot has a will, want, or desire: to be safe. That need provides the basis for the dramatic question. The home security corporation, at the climax, becomes the hero and is going to keep her safe. Even in television advertising, a good story is an effective form of communication.

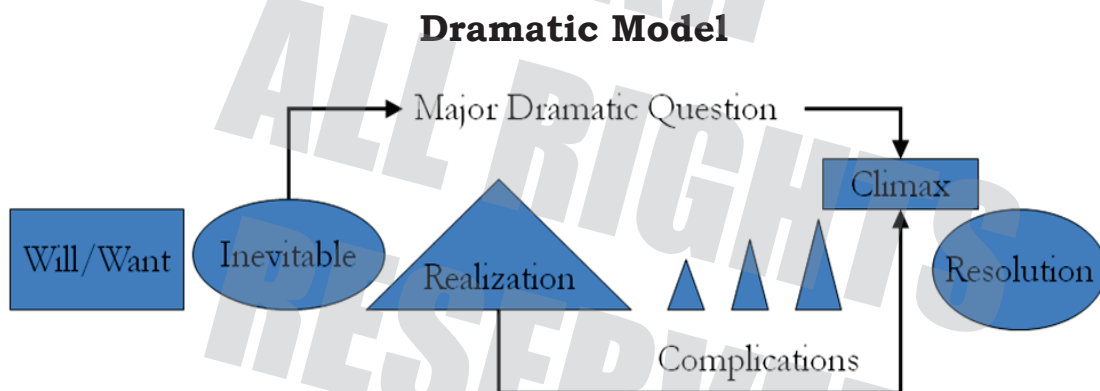
## **PROTAGONIST**

It is necessary to abstractly consider the elements of a good story. It is helpful to consider the dramatic model. First of all, in drama, you have a protagonist. A **protagonist** is a character who has a goal and they *take actions that move the story forward*. This character is the person who makes decisions and who acts in the drama.

The protagonist is a main character who, because of their choices that are the result of their will or want, actively moves the drama forward. The protagonist may also be a group of people.

## WILL/WANT

The protagonist is motivated throughout the drama by a **will/want**, which is what the protagonist desires to achieve and their will and potential ability to make such a thing occur. Sometimes there is explicit will or want and sometimes it is more implicit. The will/want often manifests as a conflict. The overall will or want is what the main character is trying to achieve, whether it be external or subconscious. The flaws in the protagonist often contribute to the conflict. That leads to the dramatic question, which is, “Will they achieve it?”



*The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is an excellent example of an effective story. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo Baggins, a hobbit from the Shire in Middle Earth, is the person who is acting (protagonist), and has a desire: to destroy the ring. Destruction of the ring is his will or want. This leads to the dramatic question: “Will Frodo make it to Mount Doom and destroy the ring?”

## REALIZATION

Usually this is a little more subtle, but the **realization** is the point at which the main character realizes what they have to do. It becomes very clear to Frodo that he must destroy the ring. And then Frodo, the protagonist, realizes that he has a quest. Frodo accepts a major will or want. There is a dramatic question that Frodo’s actions

will answer. There is usually a point in the story when the main character realizes what their goal is and what they have to do to achieve it. What is Frodo going to have to do to destroy the ring? Frodo will have to travel a long way and face many enormous challenges. The moment of his dramatic realization is when Frodo accepts those challenges.

## COMPLICATIONS

A series of complications is another major component of an effective story. **Complications** are roadblocks to achieving the will or want. Anybody or anything that can impede the achievement of the will or want is an obstacle or complication. Some stories focus on internal complications, where the main character struggles against him or herself. The best drama has both internal and external complications. These complications tend to progress, or get more severe, as the plot develops. Thus, the progressive character of complications entails elements of **rising action**.

## CLIMAX

There is a point of climax toward the end of effective drama. **Climax** is the point at which the tension related to the dramatic question is most acute. In *The Lord of the Rings*, this is the point where Frodo makes it to Mount Doom. Even after he reaches the place at which the ring can be destroyed, Frodo, once again, has to fight with Gollum. Gollum bites his finger off, but Frodo gets the ring back. Frodo has the ring, and he is ready to throw it into the lava, but the audience can see that the power of the ring starts to take Frodo over. The dramatic question, most poignant here, is, “Will he do it?” The climax is where the dramatic question is answered. Is Dorothy going to make it home to Kansas? Or does Andy Dufresne, in the *Shawshank Redemption*, get out of prison? If so, how does he do it?

## RESOLUTION

Finally, effective stories have a **resolution**. Resolution, or dénouement, is the point at which things go back to stasis, albeit sometimes changed. Action falls, and some sort of stasis resumes. For example, in *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy is in her bed in Kansas. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam are hanging out in the Green Dragon Tavern. In *Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne meets Red on a tranquil beach in Mexico. Peace returns to the situation.

A good story is constructed with this kind of structure in mind, whether the story is from the ancient Greeks or the most recent multiplex blockbuster.

Another excellent example of a quality story is *The Wizard of Oz*. Consider Dorothy, the protagonist. What does she want? She wants to go over the rainbow. Then when she gets to Oz, she realizes that rather than staying over the rainbow, she would really like to go back to Kansas. Dorothy grows. She also faces several complications; the wicked witch who wants the slippers, the wizard who can help her, but who throws a giant complication in the way when he says, "I'll help you, but only if you get the broomstick of the Wicked Witch." There are flying attack monkeys and then the giant, ominous hourglass. Dorothy must overcome several frightening complications until she throws the water on the witch. And then, the balloon leaves without her! It turns out that she can still get home by clicking her heels. Why did the Good Witch not tell her that from the beginning? Because if she did, THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN NO STORY! Imagine if the witch had said, "Just click your heels three times, and you'll go home." There would have been no need for the film *The Wizard of Oz*. Effective drama requires complications to be an engaging good story.

The key thing is that the effective mass media writer needs to think as a dramatist. As such, the writer will serve their company well. They will be able to write effective and engaging mass media messages if they can think like a dramatist.

Mass media is ubiquitous, and a mass media writer should be able to think about story when they consume mass media. Good stories, be they found in television, film, or news, utilize the dramatic principles in this model. Aspiring writers will watch mass media differently. They will be able to critically analyze stories and say, "Is there a major dramatic question based on a will or want? Did the complications increase in severity as the plot went along?" Aspiring writers will notice these things because they are going to become critical consumers of mass media. Developing dramatists should watch for the features of effective or ineffective storytelling in the television and film content they watch. They should look for good stories and seek to understand how they work. Aspiring mass media writers should also critically consume bad examples to know what does not work. As writers attempt to stand on the shoulders of giants, they need to study the stories the giants wrote that worked and learn why these seminal stories worked.

## STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Not only do we want to talk generally about dramatic principles, but in addition, we are going to talk about the four structural considerations that should always be present when you write.

### UNITY

Structural considerations are important when writing for mass media, whether it is TV, radio, film, or news. The first consideration is unity. **Unity** is whether or not everything is related. Sometimes, it is a little disconcerting when the pieces do not fit together. Do all the pieces add to the general message of the mass media piece? If so, that is unity. Extraneous elements in a story decrease unity.

### VARIETY

A second structural consideration when writing for mass media is variety. **Variety** is change or alternation in story or program elements. Variety can also be found in incorporation of differing story lines. To use variety in writing a TV commercial, the writer could choose different shots and different angles to keep people interested. If it is TV comedy, every two minutes or so, the writers could change the scene, the characters, or the subject that is being discussed. Television viewers have many program choices as the number of television channels has expanded into the triple digits. If television writers cannot keep viewers interested, viewers are going to change the channel.

### PACE

The third consideration is pace. **Pace** is the speed at which the plot moves along. A media message should not be too slow or too rushed. Pace is how quickly the mass media presentation unfolds. And the key is that the pace is appropriate for the message. Think of Jimmy John's sandwich commercials; they are fast to communicate the idea that Jimmy John's is astonishingly fast. On the opposite end of the pace spectrum there are Corona beer television advertisements. These are slow paced, showing the one shot

with the bottle and often slow camera movement. Why would the pace of the Corona television advertisement be slow? Corona beer helps relax us, like we are just hanging out on the beach.

## CLIMAX

The final structural consideration is a climax. As mentioned above, climax is the point at which the dramatic tension is the greatest. Whatever we write, we want to have a climax. In *The Lord of the Rings*, it is where Gollum has the ring and he falls into the lava, leaving the ring to dissolve in the lava of Mount Doom.

## MASS MEDIA WRITER AS A STORYTELLER

**Telling a story is about principles, not rules**, as Robert McKee has suggested. There are no strict rules, but rather effective storytelling principles. Saying the protagonist always has to be the good guy would be an example of a rule. That is mostly the case, but when writers break the mold and cut what is standard, the outcome can be good. Dramatic form is like classical musical theory in jazz: artists learn the basics, and then mess with the basics to make something new. We have all seen predictable cookie cutter movies where we know everything that is going to happen. That is not a good story. The writer is not going to surprise us and, thus, will not satisfy our desire for engaging drama. The writer is following strict formulas without breaking the rules in service of the principles. Why would audience members want to pay admission to a feature film for an unsatisfying cinematic experience?

**Effective storytelling is about eternal universal forms, not formulas**, again from McKee. When I think of universal forms, I think of Darth Vader. He is dressed in black. He is an evil guy. These are universal forms, not formulas. There are archetypes; some things about good versus evil are universal. We are interested in the stories about good versus evil. But we should not say, “Well, this is how it happened in that movie, so that is what I am going to do in my story.” Dramatists must seek to utilize universal forms and archetypes instead of just using what has worked before. And notice I said “archetypes,” not “stereotypes.” *Unforgiven* (written by David Webb Peoples and directed by Clint Eastwood) won the Oscar for Best Picture because it worked against the stereotypes. Sometimes in order to be good, the good guy has to be really bad.

Mass media writing is hard work. There are no shortcuts. **A writer needs to know at least twice the information about their subject than will actually end up in the story**, whether the story is for television, news, radio, the web, or whatever medium. A writer needs to do research. Writing is about making choices, especially choices about inclusion and exclusion. Writers have to be thorough to make good story choices. When a writer takes shortcuts on a plot, the audience can tell. The *Transformers* films are big, expensive, special effects–driven fireworks displays and have gaping holes in their plots. We see that frequently in Hollywood films. In many multiplex films, there is no depth to the characters. The characters are often one-dimensional because the writer has taken shortcuts in character development.

In today's culture, we get explosions and special effects in place of a good story and characters. Any tool can be good or bad; thus, when *The Wizard of Oz* uses color to show you Dorothy's in Kansas or Dorothy's in Oz, the effect is just great, and that is only possible because of special effects. The special effects, working with the story, really have an impact on the audience. Unfortunately, many writers today believe that as long as there is CGI, then we do not need to know about the story.

The reality is that writing is hard. To be a successful mass media writer requires much work. Quality writers master the art of storytelling, rather than second-guess the market place, according to McKee. Quality writers do not want movies that are simplistically based on what has worked before. Great writers craft stories that mean something to us personally, and that have some truth we think we can communicate to our audience.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD WRITING

When considering message and formulation, it does not matter what type of mass media form you are writing. **Effective, strong mass media has four characteristics to consider:**

1. **Is it clear?**
2. **Is it concise?**
3. **Is it correct?**
4. **Is it complete?**

The most important consideration when writing for mass media is clarity. **Clarity** reduces the difference between the intended message and the actual message,



so that the message I hope to get across is clearly interpreted by the receiver as I intended. That is the essence of clarity.

When it comes to being **concise**, I will quote Strunk and White: “Every word should tell.” As writers, we must be concise; there should not be excess, unnecessary signs offered to the audience. The message should be to the point and communicated in as few as possible words. Here, I also suggest that it should have parsimony. It is elegant for a mathematician to take an equation and put it in the fewest possible terms. There is elegance in parsimony; praise comes when communication is in its most concise terms. In terms of mass media, every word costs money. You want to be concise so that you can fit your message into the spot for which you paid you paid. The third characteristic that all mass media messages must have is to be **correct**. Wrong names, wrong time, and wrong place will undoubtedly anger the audience and negatively impact the credibility of the message. When I was teaching at Stanford, one of my fellow professors read that Michael Moore was coming to town. The story informed us that Moore was giving a speech at the Ladies’ Flower Auxiliary, an event many of us did not know or care about. Regardless, we found it exciting that Michael Moore was scheduled to talk on our campus. The professor sent me the article illustrated with a picture of the documentary filmmaker Michael Moore. From a mass media perspective, we thought it would be a good idea for Michael Moore to come and speak to the political communication class we were teaching. He enthusiastically called the paper to obtain Moore’s contact information and eventually got a hold of him. The professor told Moore that he could not wait for him to come and discuss politics and film to our students. Moore’s response was unexpected. When asked to speak to the class, Moore said, “Politics? Film? I don’t think I’m the same Michael Moore that you’re thinking I am. I’m a botanist; I developed a new type of flower.” Suffice it to say, it was a very embarrassing situation. It was embarrassing for the botanist Michael Moore, who felt dismissed when we no longer wanted him to speak to our class, it was embarrassing to the paper that ran the story, and it was especially embarrassing to the writer of the article.

This example effectively illustrates the need to conduct thorough research to ensure our stories are always correct. The reporters received the information and just ran with it without doing a proper fact check. I would venture to say that the reporter does not work for that paper anymore. Inaccuracy hurts the reporter, it hurts the newspaper, and more significantly it hurts journalism as a whole. Situations like this make us look untrustworthy as writers and reporters in mass media.

The fourth consideration for effective mass media messages is that they are **complete**. If you are writing a piece about an upcoming theatrical production but you do not include the time of the show, you have ruined the point of the story. When we are writing for mass media, we must be clear, concise, correct, and complete. As writers we can always find a place for strategic ambiguity, but it is important to note that this strategy is not the same as writing a story that lacks clarity. For example, the final episode of *The Sopranos* ended ambiguously. However, it was not unclear. The audience could clearly see that Tony was sitting at the dining room table and clearly recognize the blackout that occurred. Just because ambiguity is present does not mean a message is unclear. However, when using ambiguity in our writing, we must be just as strategic as we would if we were intending to be clear.

In this chapter we have discussed the necessity of the mass media writer to tell a good story. We discussed a model of drama, structural considerations, the role of a mass media writer as a storyteller, and characteristics of quality writing. The mass media writer must think like a dramatist.

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