The LLL SIG Newsletter

Life As Story

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In the southern territory of Oregon, near the majestic Lake of the Woods, young John Jones was wandering through the forest. As he wandered, he calmly breathed in the fresh air and gazed upon the grand, green trees.

Then he came to an open field. The grass was smooth, flowing, and soft. He could see the sky. It was deep, blue, and clear. Up above, round clouds floated by like ships sailing in an endless sea.

Then John heard something. He looked down and noticed a large rabbit in the grass. The forest became silent, and without moving or breathing, the two just looked at each other in the quiet of the woods.

John thought to himself, "If I capture this rabbit, I can sell it to the hat maker. Then I can purchase some pigs. The pigs will have babies, and I can sell them to the butcher. With the money, I can acquire some cows. The cows will have babies, and then I can start a ranch."

"In time, I will become wealthy, and finally I can marry my sweetheart, Elisabeth Smith. We will have two strong boys, and they will labor together with me on my ranch. But, like me, they will be lazy boys, and they will love leisure and sleep. I will have trouble waking them up in the mornings. I'll have to shout at them, 'Hey boys! Wake up!! It's time for work!'"

And then, just like that, the rabbit in the field ran away and disappeared. And so did the dreams of young John Jones.

The above story is often told by the famous English storyteller, Hugh Lupton. Written or told well, this little story engages and surprises readers and listeners. It also carries a lesson for life.

The story of "The Rabbit" is a story within a story. The basic story is what John Jones does. He walks through the forest. He sees a rabbit. He dreams a dream. The story within the story is what he dreams. He dreams to become rich, change his life, and find love.

The simple lesson in this story is that for his dreams to come true, John Jones needs to be more than a dreamer. He needs to be an active doer, and if he only dreams, his dreams may disappear like the rabbit in the field.

Besides this simple lesson for life, this story also reminds us that we humans are wonderfully bound to story. Our lives are stories, but the story within the story also shows us something quite basic to human nature. We dream up and make up stories.

John's daydream is typical of what we do every day. When we succeed at work, we may tell ourselves (and others) a story about it. The confident person may say, "I'm good at this. I knew I could do it." But after failure, a person lacking confidence may say, "I knew I would blow it. I'm just no good." But the point is this. We tell ourselves stories. We live by them, and we die by them.

Because story is so central to life, we would do well to understand it better. Experts tell us that good stories have key elements. In his book, The "Storytelling Animal," author Jonathan Gottschall (2012) gives a succinct summary of the elements of story or story grammar. He says that all good stories consist of "character + predicament + attempted extrication."

In other words, in every good story, a character meets trouble or conflict and tries to get out of it. Of course there is much more to good storytelling, but this is the fundamental formula. Adding detail and depth to this basic formula, Kendall Haven (2007), an expert storyteller and author of many books on story, provides eight elements of story grammar.

1. Who is the **main character**?
2. What **traits** make the character interesting?
3. What is the main character's **goal**?
4. Why is the goal important, or what's the main character's **motive**?
5. What **conflicts** block the character?
6. How do conflicts create **risk and danger**?
7. What **struggles** does the character experience to reach the goal?
8. What **sensory details** make the story feel real?

Another simple but memorable summary of the principles of story comes from screenwriter, Thomas B. Sawyer (2007). He summarizes the three-act structure of many stories in this way. First, the storyteller puts the protagonist up in a tree. Second, the storyteller throws stones at the protagonist. Third, the storyteller gets the protagonist down from the tree.

There are many ways we can summarize the elements of story, and learners of all ages can benefit from knowing the essentials of story grammar. Just what are these benefits?

The first benefit is all about enjoyment. By knowing the grammar of story, learners can better appreciate good stories when they meet them. Moreover, when learners are bored by stories, they can better understand why a particular story doesn't grab them. Perhaps the main character didn't have a clear goal, or the conflict was shallow or non-existent. It is also possible that learners fail to differentiate the characters and discern their goals. But if learners know story grammar, they can more easily find it in stories and thus enjoy story more.

The second benefit of knowing story grammar is all about creativity. As learners grow their understanding of story grammar, they can better create stories that capture the interest and imagination of readers and listeners. And this is not just for creative writers of fiction.

Business people often use storytelling techniques to promote their products and create a positive culture in the workplace. Communicators of all kinds can enhance their writings and presentations by using the elements of story grammar when they communicate ideas. Student writers, teachers, and academics can improve their writing and speaking by adding the elements of story grammar to their non-fiction prose and speech.

The third benefit of knowing about story grammar is all about editing one's life. In 2003, the author Donald Miller published his memoirs, which sold over a million copies and became a *New York Times* bestseller. Movie producers approached Miller and asked to make a movie about his life. Like all films that are "based on true events," Miller had to edit and improve upon the truth of his life story in order to make it more interesting for the big screen.

During this process, Miller (2009) asked himself this question. "If I can edit my life for this film to make it a more interesting story, then why can't I edit my own real life to make it a more interesting story?" And that's just what Miller did. As the main character in his life story, he set challenging goals for himself that created conflict, risk, and struggle. He bicycled across the United States for charity. He hiked the Inca trail. He created a mentoring program for fatherless children. In a word, he applied the principles of story to edit and change his life.

The principles of story remind us that life is story. By better understanding these principles, learners can more fully enjoy good stories in drama, television, film, and books. They can also create better stories and use the power of story for communication in life, business, and education. And by better understanding story grammar, learners of all ages can use the principles of story to edit life, making their life stories more compelling, more enchanting, and richer in purpose.

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