

## Storytelling: Now or Never J. Larson, NPPA Workshop

Storytelling is as old as language. The basic rules have not changed. You need story line: surprise, character, and quest. Do you have tension? Release? What elements have you chosen and why? Move like a photographer or reporter, but think like a storyteller.

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1. Surprise! All good stories have surprises. Anticipate them, allow them to happen. If your story is predictable you don't have much of a story. The secret: the set-up.
2. Do you have Plot, or "Quest"? Is someone trying to get something done? "Quest" allows tension and release.
3. Great stories begin and end with people. Not talking heads. Develop Character! Even when it at first appears a character is not there.
4. Find a way to care. Your first mission on any story: find a way to care. If YOU don't care NO ONE will.
5. Remember: God is in the details. Telling Detail is often found on the edges of your story line. Listen. Pay attention. The right detail gives you the world - the pause before the gasp, the secret deeper meanings. Gather details until you find a way to care.
6. Look for universal themes, "echoes". Is it a story about the love of a father, pride of accomplishment, failure of government? Or is it just another press release?
7. The smallest, least powerful voice frequently holds the most powerful story. Search the smallest places, and then think Big.
8. Once you've found a reason to care- FOCUS!  
You'll know your focus when you hear it, or see it. It will make you smile, shake your head in disgust, or sense the "shared truth".
9. Writers - Be ruthless about your focus- Kill the Babies.
10. Once you've focused, prove your focus with video and sound.  
If you're reporting how hard someone had to work, prove "hard work" IN YOUR TAPE! Don't talk over your points- show them, or better yet- experience them.
11. Allow your viewers to experience the same surprise, alarm, joy you experienced when you first discovered your story.

12. Sound is the heartbeat, the engine. Use sound as punctuation, cadence, beat. Remember, a great preacher uses rhythm to draw his congregation closer. Storytellers also do this.
13. Parallel Park your tracks if you want to keep your viewer "inside" the scene.
14. Follow the energy of what happens on your videotape, and in the edit bay. Be ready to change directions.
15. Frequently, the "juice" is in the raw tape. The offhand comment, the way someone moves through the frame can make a story. Look at raw tape with "new eyes".
16. Play left field. Someone has to think outside the box. Have "What if conversations with people you work with.
17. Great stories frequently begin with a great concept.
18. Listen to your values. Find one story to make your own.
19. You are the only ones in your newsroom who "See the Opera". Only you see hopes rise, or tears fall. Management does not ask a question, write a line, or take a picture. Your work requires your best effort: Your Eyes, Your Ears, Your Heart, Your Mind.
20. Recheck number #4



# BOB DOTSON'S STORY CHECKLIST

## Always remember . . . The reporter is not the story.

### COMMITMENT PRESENT

Commitment is the story stated in one sentence—what you want the audience to take away from the report.

The commitment should be stated as a complete sentence with subject, verb, and object. "Outside money is altering the city's architecture," "This cow has never taken an order in her life," "You can't murder a pumpkin," etc.

Prove the commitment visually. Very seldom will you state the commitment verbally in any story.

### BEGINNING

Write your pictures first. Give them a strong lead, preferably visual, that instantly telegraphs the story to come.

### MIDDLE

Main body of the story, usually no more than three to five main points, which you prove visually once you have identified them.

### ENDING

A strong close that you can't top, something you build toward throughout the story. Ideally, the ending is also visual.

### WRITE LOOSE

Be hard on yourself as a writer. Say nothing in script your viewers would already know or that the visuals say more eloquently.

### SEQUENCES

Throughout the story, build your report around sequences—two or three shots of a guy buying basketball tickets; two or three shots of a husband and wife drinking coffee at a kitchen table, etc. Sequences demand matched action.

### MOMENTS OF SILENCE

Stop writing occasionally and let two or three seconds or more of compelling action occur without voice over. For a writer, nothing is more difficult to write than silence. For viewers, sometimes nothing is more eloquent.

### STRONG, NATURAL SOUND

To heighten realism, authenticity, believability; to heighten the viewer's sense of vicarious participation in the events you're showing. Some reports merely let you watch what happened. The best reports let you experience what happened.

### TELL YOUR STORY THROUGH PEOPLE

People sell your story. Try to find strong central characters engaged in compelling action that is visual or picturesque.

### SURPRISES

Build in surprises to sustain viewer involvement. Surprises help viewers feel something about the story; surprises lure uninterested viewers to the screen. Surprises can be visual, wild sound, short bites or poetic script. Always, surprises are little moments of drama.

### SHORT SOUND BITES

Short bites prove the story you are showing. Don't use sound bites as substitutes for more effective story telling.

### ADDRESS THE LARGER ISSUE

A trailer home burned down. Such a story fails to meet the "So What?" Test. The trailer home burned down because the walls are full of flammable insulation describes the larger issue and meets the "So What?" Test.

### MAKE IT MEMORABLE

Can your viewers feel something about the story and its subjects? If feeling is present, the story will be memorable. It will stick in the viewers' minds.

# BOB DOTSON'S QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- Compelling story subject with universal values that appeal to a wide audience?
- Strong opening, preferably a visual lead, that instantly telegraphs the story to come?
- Strong writing, free of gimmies and information people would already know?
- Standups, if any, were used appropriately and were not used to substitute for more compelling elements of the story? Do standups deliver visual information that helps drive the story forward?
- Voice Overs delivered with interest, authority, spontaneity, feeling?
- Camera work (steadiness; creative treatment of content and composition; angles; minimal use of pans and zooms; how well camera work meets professional and creative standards?)
- Lighting (natural; contrast control; use of available light; overall competency?)
- Sound quality (crisp, clean, appropriate use of wild sound and background sound?)
- Quality of editing (pacing; use of sequences; matched action; overlapping sound, etc.?)
- Story builds to a strong close?
- Elements of "surprise" within the visuals or sound to hold and attract viewers?
- Subject matter interesting, concrete, important — not just another fluff piece?
- Package meets and answers the "So What?" Test because it contains historical perspective that defines the story's larger context (or addresses a larger issue)?
- Package told story through people engaged in compelling action that was visual or picturesque? Does the report let people tell their own stories whenever possible?
- Did the reporter/editor let the camera talk for itself whenever possible?
- Does the sound track carry meaning that can help the viewers create secondary visual images (subtext)?
- Is Voice Over tight, active voice, understandable, readable, listenable?
- Is music, if any, appropriate to content and mood?

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