

Week 4: Storytelling for User Experience

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Reading Chapter 13, Combining the Ingredients of a Story from the book *Storytelling for User Experience* by Whitney Quesenbery and Kevin Brooks helped me to understand the basic elements of a story, their significance, and how each contributes to an effective narrative. The following quotes stood out to me.

The perspective (or perspectives) you choose limits what the people in the story see and experience.

The example in the book talked about a group of blind men describing an elephant while each is only exposed to a different part, such as the trunk, the leg, or the tusk. The lens through which you tell a story will define how the story is perceived. News media is often like this. A right-wing vs left-wing news publication will cover the same news event with opposing agendas. The perspective of the story has a great deal to do with how much information you give the audience as well. Do you provide backstory? Are you sympathetic to one character more than another? Perspective can allow us to root for the bad guy if we know enough about him to understand his motivations. If we aren't given that information, we don't care. For the purpose of telling User Experience stories, we should write from the perspective of the person experiencing the problem. We should empathize with their background and goals and help the reader visual themselves from their perspective.

Show don't just tell. Find ways to communicate characteristics that describe actions ("show") rather than just piling on a series of adjectives ("tell").

This suggestion seems like one that separates good from great storytelling. The way we describe a character can impact how deeply the reader will connect with her. Writing that a character is budget conscious vs writing that the character spends two hours on Sundays clipping coupons to make sure her paycheck lasts until the end of the week will likely resonate more deeply with the audience. I appreciate that the advice is specific to action words. This makes the writing feel more alive. We are advised not to merely describe, but to use the characters actions to paint a better picture.

You can build context in just a few words, letting the audience fill in the details. All stories rely on our ability to fill in the blanks. As with character, the details you leave out are just as important as what you put in. While there are no hard and fast guidelines about what to leave out, consider leaving out noncritical details that might be fun for the audience to fill in for themselves.

I struggled a bit with this idea. The book offered many ways to add context to stories; physical, emotional, sensory, historical and memory. That said, what is the right amount of context? What do I want to allow the reader to make theirs and what context do I want to direct? If I follow the notion that the reader should see themselves in the story, then which details do I leave out? I think this idea will take time and practice to develop. Only through writing stories and receiving feedback from a diverse audience do I anticipate I will have a better grasp of this strategy.

Don't let the stories become a procedural description of how to use a product.

This last quote seems simple, but can be overlooked, especially from a user experience design perspective. We are trained to be procedural when researching and prototyping. It is natural that this thought process would spill over into storytelling. We must remember that a story has a different rhythm and flow. A story is not a manual or a list of bullet points. We should strive to tell stories naturally through micro-moments. What is the character trying to do or learn? When they try to solve their problem, what happens? Let's use these stories as opportunities to put our products and solutions into real world scenarios.