What is an annotation? An annotation is a summarization of information that you gathered from a reading. Its purpose is to help you save time for studying for exams. it is also to help you understand the content that you have read.

Storytelling, Narration, and the "Who I Am" Story

by Catherine Ramsdell

Are stories just a form of entertainment—like movies, television shows, books, and video games? Or are they something more? This chapter takes the stance that stories are a fundamental and primary form of communication, and without them, we would lose an important way to teach our children, to train our employees, to sell our products, and to make information memorable to those of any age.

Consider a Jewish story Annette Simmons references in her book *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling*:

> Truth, naked and cold, had been turned away from every door in the village. Her nakedness frightened the people. When Parable found her she was huddled in a corner, shivering and hungry. Taking pity on her, Parable gathered her up and took her home. There, she dressed Truth in story, warmed her and sent her out again. Clothed in story, Truth knocked again at the doors and was readily welcomed into the villagers' houses. They invited her to eat at their tables and warm herself by their fires. (27)

Certainly stories can be a form of entertainment—a book to curl up with on a cold rainy afternoon, a movie to share with a best friend, a video game to conquer—but stories can also be much more and, as will be discussed at the end of the chapter, today stories can be found just about anywhere. Furthermore, because stories can be found anywhere from a movie theatre to a corporate boardroom, everyone should know how to tell a good story.

In her book, *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling*, Simmons talks about seven different kinds of stories everyone should learn how to tell. One of them is the "Who I Am" story. Simply put, a Who I Am story shows something about its author, and this type of story fits into the genre of memoir or creative nonfiction. Here is an example from Simmons' book:

> Skip looked into the sea of suspicious stockholders and wondered what might convince them to follow his leadership. He was 35, looked 13 and was third generation rich. He could tell they assumed he would be an unholy disaster as a leader. He decided to tell them a story. "My first job was drawing the electrical engineering plans for a boat building company. The drawings had to be perfect because if the wires were not accurately placed before the fiberglass form was poured, a mistake might cost a million dollars, easy. At 25, I already had two masters' degrees. I had been on boats all my life and frankly, I found drawing these plans a bit . . . mindless. One morning I got a call at home from a $6/hour worker asking me 'are you sure this is right?' I was incensed. Of course I was sure—'just pour the damn thing.' When his supervisor called me an hour later and woke me up again and asked 'are you sure this is right?' I had even less patience. 'I said I was sure an hour ago and I'm still sure.'
>
> It was the phone call from the president of the company that finally got me out of bed and down to the site. If I had to hold these guys by the hand, so be it. I sought out the worker

What annotation strategies work best. The best would be where you mark your information that is relevant. That can be used as key points of information using comments to give yourself context to the information that you mark.

What annotation strategies don't work well? The ones that were you just randomly mark information that you think is important without any context. Putting comments to the side so you can understand what you have marked and not questioning why you marked these things.

> who had called me first. He sat looking at my plans with his head cocked to one side. With exaggerated patience I began to explain the drawing. But after a few words my voice got weaker and my head started to cock to the side as well. It seems that I had (being left-handed) transposed starboard and port so that the drawing was an exact mirror image of what it should have been. Thank God this $6/hour worker had caught my mistake before it was too late. The next day I found this box on my desk. The crew bought me a remedial pair of tennis shoes for future reference. Just in case I got mixed up again—a red left shoe for port, and a green right one for starboard. These shoes don't just help me remember port and starboard. They help me remember to listen even when I think I know what's going on."
>
> As he held up the shoebox with one red and one green shoe, there were smiles and smirks. The stockholders relaxed a bit. If this young upstart had already learned this lesson about arrogance, then he might have learned a few things about running companies, too. (1–2)

This example shows some of the reasons why people tell Who I Am stories. Chances are that if Skip had gone into this meeting and said "Look, I know I'm young, but I've got a lot of experience, I know what I'm doing, I've learned a lot from my mistakes. Just trust me," he would not have won over his audience. Please keep this example and the basic definition of the Who I Am story in mind while reading through the next section, which provides a little background and theory about the fine art of narration and storytelling.

Because the purpose of a Who I Am story is to illustrate something about oneself, some might assume that character is the most important aspect of the Who I Am story, but in truth, both character and action are important in this type of story. Granted, thinking of the people in a Who I Am story as characters may seem odd because most likely they will be real people. However, consider Theodore A. Rees Cheney's thoughts:

> Traditional nonfiction, particularly journalistic nonfiction, never concerned itself with developing characters. Fiction writers worked at characterization; nonfiction writers concentrated on events. Creative nonfiction writers say that because so many events occur as the result of human interactions, the event cannot be fully understood without also understanding something of the people (characters) surrounding it. (134)

So while thinking of yourself, friends, or family as characters may not feel completely natural, remember some similarities do exist between characters and real people in that the people/characters in a Who I Am story need to be developed, interesting, and understandable, just like characters in a fiction work. Of course, some differences exist as well. Since the characters in a Who I Am story are real people, you will not be creating characters, as a fiction writer does; instead, as Cheney notes, you will be revealing them:

> When I write about character development, I'm talking about how the writer goes about revealing a person's character . .. The creative nonfiction writer does not 'create' characters; rather, he or she reveals them to the reader as honestly and accurately

> as possible. Like most contemporary fiction writers, creative nonfiction writers reveal character much as it happens in real life—bit by bit. (134)

Generally speaking, authors reveal their characters in two ways: direct and indirect characterization. With direct characterization, the author simply tells the audience something about a character. The line "He was 35, looked 13 and was third generation rich" from the Who I Am story at the beginning of this chapter is an example of direct characterization. With indirect characterization, the audience learns about characters by watching or listening to them.

Indirect characterization can also include descriptions of characters. The Who I Am story at the start of this chapter primarily utilizes indirect characterization. The entire story Skip tells about his first job, the mindless drawing, being upset about an hourly worker calling him at home—all indirect characterization. Since indirect characterization shows what a character does, indirect characterization often directly relates to the sequence of actions, again showing how character and action can intertwine.

Another important piece of a story and narrative discourse is the difference between real time and narrative time. Consider the following passage:

> *Amy dropped a mug of coffee. It shattered on the kitchen floor. Coffee and shattered glass were everywhere. Amy got a towel and began cleaning up the mess.*

This is real time, but if a few details are added, we get narrative time:

> *Amy dropped a mug of coffee. It shattered with a loud crash onto the kitchen floor. She felt the hot liquid burn through her socks into her feet. Coffee and shattered glass were everywhere. Amy sighed; there was no more coffee in the pot, and she had really needed a caffeine burst. Moving carefully through the mess, Amy grabbed an old towel out of the drawer and began cleaning up the remains of her breakfast.*

Abbott explains the difference between real (or clock) time and narrative time:

> Clock time . . . always relates back to itself, so that one speaks in terms of numbers or seconds or their multiples (minutes, hours) and fractions (nanoseconds). Narrative time, in contrast, relates to events or incidents. And while clock time is necessarily marked off by regular intervals of a certain length, narrative time is not necessarily any length at all. (4–5)

Abbott adds that writers can slow the "whole sequence down by simply adding details" and "conversely, we can make narrative time go like the wind" by using phrases like "in the following months" or "a few weeks later" (5).

The universality of narrative, character and action, indirect and direct representation, real time and narrative time are just a few aspects of narrative theory, but these terms and this information will provide a solid foundation as we begin thinking more specifically about the Who I Am story.

Writing a story is not like baking a cake—there is no formula or recipe that guarantees a perfect story. But here are some steps to consider:

1. **Ask some questions about the event you are going to write about.** When did this event take place? What are the starting and ending points? Where did this event take place? Who was there? Was there a conflict? A resolution?

2. **Write down everything you remember.** Of course, there are numerous ways to write a first draft, but for a Who I Am story, simply writing down everything you remember about the event is a good place to start. Usually, it is better to have more writing than what you need. So start by writing everything down in chronological order. Do not worry about any rhetorical strategies or making it sound good. Think about the concept of fabula and just write down the entire series of events or actions.

3. **Go do something else.** Once you have the entire story written down, set it aside. Go take a nap or play with your dog, and come back to the story later. Then reread it and see if you left anything out. Time permitting, go through this process of putting the story aside and then rereading it several times.

4. **Summarize the main point of the story in one or two sentences.** Go through the story and eliminate everything that does not relate to this main point. Do not worry about length right now. Focus on quality and creating a unified story.

5. **Think about creating a dominant impression.** Is the story sad, thoughtful, sarcastic, or humorous? If you have trouble deciding on a dominant impression, think about setting the story to music. What song would you pick—Mozart's "Moonlight Sonata," something by the Violent Femmes, a sultry jazz tune—and what emotion does this song conjure up?

6. **Keeping the main point and dominant impression in mind, add details and expand the most important parts of your story.** Real time should now become narrative time. Add concrete details and imagery. Imagine the different senses to which the story could appeal. We are a very visual culture, but go beyond describing what things look like—consider incorporating smells or sounds. Think about the way something feels when touched. Also think about how these details can help draw a reader in. Consider this an example from a student's Who I Am story:

> *At the beginning of every school year, I am obligated to introduce myself to a new sea of adolescent hormones swimming with impulsiveness, curiosity, and unfiltered tourette-like verbal ejaculations. Sure, I could stand before the little urchins, and with trident in hand, I could dictate the rules of my class and cast off a long list of life experiences that made me the immortal that stands before them or I could let them place their expectations upon me creating an environment of perceived equality. Being a believer in a democratic classroom, I always opt for the latter.*

Look at the way this student builds on the details: the words "sea," "swimming" and "trident" work beautifully together. And look at the choices the student made: using the words "adolescent

hormones" and "urchins" instead of students; "unfiltered tourette-like verbal ejaculations" could have simply been opinions or obnoxious comments. The story includes a lot of visual elements, but the phrase "verbal ejaculations" also appeals to the ears. These words, phrases, and ideas all work together to, as clichéd as it sounds, paint a picture of the author of this story. The author of this story is a student, but she is also a middle-school teacher. The main point of the story is to show who she is as a teacher. Everything in this paragraph relates to that main point. We do not know the color of her hair, whether she is wearing a shirt or a sweater, or if she is tall or short. After all, none of these things relate to the point of this story. Great detail and description and emotions are very important to the Who I Am story. But they need to be the right details, descriptions, and emotions, and they need to be used at the right time.

7. **Make certain the story shows and does not tell.** The ultimate success of the Who I Am story depends on how well you show, not tell, who you are (i.e. use more indirect characterization than direct characterization). Have faith in your words and in the story you are telling. Trust that the story works and do not end the story with a statement like "clearly this event shows that I am a trustworthy person." Let the story do its job. Consider two more paragraphs from our middle-school teacher's story:

> *On the first day of class last year, I allowed students to take seats at their leisure. I sat on my desk and when everyone was settled, I quietly commanded their attention by placing a large black top hat upon my head. Conversations abruptly stopped as my curious audience took notice. 'If I were to say that hats are a metaphor for the different roles we play in our lives, what do you think that means?' I was met with blank stares. 'What if I said that I play many roles every day? I am a teacher, a mother, a daughter, a coworker, and a friend. Are the expectations for those different roles the same or different?' A hand raises and a girl with pale skin, lively eyes and thick auburn hair answers, 'Of course they're different. I don't act the same around my friends as I do in front of my parents!' She has a smug 'as if' expression. 'You're absolutely right,' I acknowledge. 'Now what if I were to ask you to define the expectations of my role as your teacher?' Eyebrows rise as the class considers this. 'I'm going to pass out sticky notes and I want each of you to write down a word or phrase that describes what my job is as your teacher. When you are done, I want you to place your note on the strip of blue paper that runs up the wall in the back of the room. Each of you should place your note above the note of the person that went before you so that we create a column of sticky notes. Does everyone understand?' A thin-faced, black boy with large eyes and bright teeth pipes up, "So we get to tell you how to do your job?' I thoughtfully pause before answering, 'Well . . . yeah!'*

What do we learn about the author from reading this passage? What kind of teacher is she? We could describe her as creative, brave, caring, and dedicated. We could decide that she is not afraid to take some risks. We know that she loves her job. Does she directly state any of these things? No. But her story shows that she is all of these things.

8. **Look at the introduction of your story**. Will it grab a reader's attention? Think about sitting in a doctor's office or waiting for your car to be repaired. You pick up a magazine and start to thumb through it. How long do you give an article to grab your attention before turning the page?

Some people flip to the next page if the title of the article does not interest them; other more generous readers will read the first sentence or two before deciding to continue reading or to move on to the next page. Something in the opening paragraph, hopefully in the first sentence or two, should grab the reader and make him or her want to read on. Here is an example from another student's Who I Am story:

> *I thought by the time I was thirty I would know what I wanted to be when I grew up. But here I am on the eve of my thirty-first birthday, and I am still searching, searching for where I fit into the world, amidst all the titles I have been given such as Sydney's Mom, Tripp's Wife, and Janice's Daughter. Then there are all the roles I play: maid, chef, bookkeeper, personal shopper, and teacher. Of course that's just what I do and who I do it for. The real question remains, when you take all of that away, who am I?*

This is the first paragraph of the student's Who I Am essay, and it does several things nicely. The conversational tone draws us in. We almost feel as if we are getting to peek inside the author's head. "Tripp's Wife," "Janice's Daughter," "chef," "personal shopper" are lovely specifics, and equally important, these are specifics to which most people can relate. Perhaps we are Bob's son or Suzie's boyfriend instead of a daughter or a wife, but we can still see the similarities between the author's life and our own. And because of that, we want to know how she answers the question "who am I?"

9. **Treat this story like any other paper.** Have a solid organizational scheme (chronological often works well), keep one main idea per paragraph, use transitional phrasing, vary the sentence structure, and make sure the ideas flow into each other. Reflect on word choice and particularly verb choices. Just think, for example, of all the different synonyms for the word walk. A character could strut, saunter, stroll, sashay, or skip. She could mosey, meander, or march. Powerful verbs are a great way to add panache and detail to a story without making it wordy or slowing the pace.

10. **Proofread, edit, and proofread again.** Give the story to a friend and ask them to read it. Do not tell them what the paper is about or what you are trying to accomplish. Instead just ask them what they learned or what three words they would use to describe your story.

11. **And the last bit of advice—have fun.** The best storytellers enjoy telling stories. When you are telling a story, pick a story that matters to you and a story that you really want to share. Let your love for that story come through, and let others see you through your story.

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