Pixar's 22 Rules For Storytelling

A must-read for writers, entrepreneurs, and anyone who wants to tell captivating stories:

You might be thinking:

Why should I study lessons from an animated film company?

Because whatever your job is, you're in the business of storytelling.

Communication is the essence of winning people to your way of thinking.

And storytelling is the essence of communication.

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Rule #1: You admire a character for trying more than for their successes.

Your audience loves the story - the path - the ups and downs.

For stories, brands, and products - focus on the how and why (and less on the what).

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Rule #2: You gotta keep in mind what's interesting to you as an audience, not what's fun to do as a writer.

They can be very different.

This is similar to Craig Clemens's first rule of writing:

You, the writer, are completely irrelevant.

Focus on delivering to the audience.

Rule #3: Trying for theme is important, but you won't see what the story is actually about til you're at the end of it. Now rewrite.

Your original idea rarely ends up the same as your final idea.

So don't overthink it - take something, get it going, then refine it.

Rule #4: Use a proven "story spine"

> Once upon a time there was ___.
>
> Every day, ___.
>
> One day ___.
>
> Because of that, ___.
>
> Because of that, ___. Until finally ___.

This one is my favorite.

Whether you're a writer, an entrepreneur, or a brand, you can use this "story spine" to effortlessly create a narrative.

Rule #5: Simplify. Focus. Combine characters. Hop over detours. You'll feel like you're losing valuable stuff but it sets you free.

This goes far beyond storytelling.

The goal for every writer, marketer, or entrepreneur should be to add constraints and do more with less.

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Rule #6: What is your character good at, comfortable with? Throw the polar opposite at them. Challenge them. How do they deal?

Think of this like the inversion technique.

What is everyone in your niche saying?

How can you say the same things, but in different ways?

Rule #7: Come up with your ending before you figure out your middle. Seriously. Endings are hard, get yours working up front.

Stories, sales pages, brand pitches - always start with the end in mind and work backward from there.

Rule #8: Finish your story, let go even if it's not perfect. In an ideal world you have both, but move on. Do better next time.

Reminds me of this famous quote:

"No book is ever finished, it is merely abandoned."

Don't let perfectionism keep you from publishing.

Rule #9: When you're stuck, make a list of what WOULDN'T happen next. Lots of times the material to get you unstuck will show up.

This is the ultimate hack to overcome writer's block.

Make a list of everything you **don't** want to write about to get the juices flowing.

Rule #10: Pull apart the stories you like. What you like in them is a part of you; you've got to recognize it before you can use it.

90% of being a good writer or storyteller is being a good *noticer*.

Notice when things resonate with you and start asking why.

Rule #11: Putting it on paper lets you start fixing it. If it stays in your head, a perfect idea, you'll never share it with anyone.

Your head is the worst place to store ideas.

This is why Tim Ferriss commits to writing 2 crappy pages per day.

Focus on getting the raw material.

Rule #12: Discount the 1st thing that comes to mind. And the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th – get the obvious out of the way. Surprise yourself.

This reminds me of Julian Shapiro's **Creativity Faucet** idea.

To find your best ideas, you need to unclog all the junk first.

Rule #13: Give your characters opinions. Passive/malleable might seem likable to you as you write, but it's poison to the audience.

Your opinions should make your audience take a stand.

No "it seems" or "maybes" or "potentiallys" - take a stand and don't hedge.

Rule #14: Why must you tell THIS story? What's the belief burning within you that your story feeds off of? That's the heart of it.

Nothing to add on this one.

It's one of the best reflection questions I've ever come across.

Rule #15: If you were your character, in this situation, how would you feel? Honesty lends credibility to unbelievable situations.

The best writers and storytellers strike the balance of authenticity (like telling personal stories) while still providing value to the audience.

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Rule #16: What are the stakes? Give us a reason to root for the character. What happens if they don't succeed? Stack the odds against.

"Stakes" are part of the foundation on which every good story is built.

For more, check out Matthew Dick's book *Storyworthy.*

Rule #17: No work is ever wasted. If it's not working, let go and move on - it'll come back around to be useful later.

You won't always put our your best stuff.

And trying to do so is impossible (and leads to burnout).

So focus on showing up - consistency creates competence.

Rule #18: You have to know yourself: the difference between doing your best & fussing. Story is testing, not refining.

Too often people get caught up in trying to plan every step from A to Z.

And this "planning" is really procrastination in disguise.

Rule #19: Coincidences to get characters into trouble are great; coincidences to get them out of it are cheating.

Rule #20: Exercise: take the building blocks of a movie you dislike. How would you rearrange them into what you DO like?

You can use this for every creative medium.

When something doesn't resonate with you (an article, a tweet, an ad, a story) ask why.

Then, make it better.

Rule #21: You gotta identify with your situation/characters, can't just write 'cool'. What would make YOU act that way?

This goes both ways - you need to put yourself in your character's shoes AND your audience's shoes.

Make your listener feel understood (through authenticity).

Rule #22: What's the essence of your story? Most economical telling of it? If you know that, you can build from there.

And the best for last - ask yourself: what are you *really* trying to say (in as few words as possible).

Strip away everything that distracts from that goal.