



# Pixar's 22 Rules For Storytelling

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



## The most creative company of the last 30 years:

**Pixar.**

Back in 2011, Pixar storyboard artist Emma Coats shared their "22 Rules For Storytelling."

Here's the breakdown:





**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.



## **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).





**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.





**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.





**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 out 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.



## **Boom, that's a wrap!**

I find myself rereading these rules quite often - and every time I reread them, I come away with a new golden nugget.

And if you want more writing tips...





Here's a free, **13,000-word Ultimate Guide** on how to start writing online:



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