Storytelling

A method of creating imagery, emotions, and understanding of events through an interaction between a storyteller and an audience.

Storytelling is uniquely human. It is the original method of passing knowledge from one generation to the next, and remains one of the most compelling methods for richly communicating knowledge. Storytelling can be oral, as in the traditional telling of a tale; visual, as in an information graph or movie; or textual, as in a poem or novel. More recently, *digital storytelling* has emerged, which involves telling a story using digital media. This might take the form of a computerized slide show, a digital video, or educational software. A storyteller can be any instrument of information presentation that engages an audience to experience a set of events.[1]
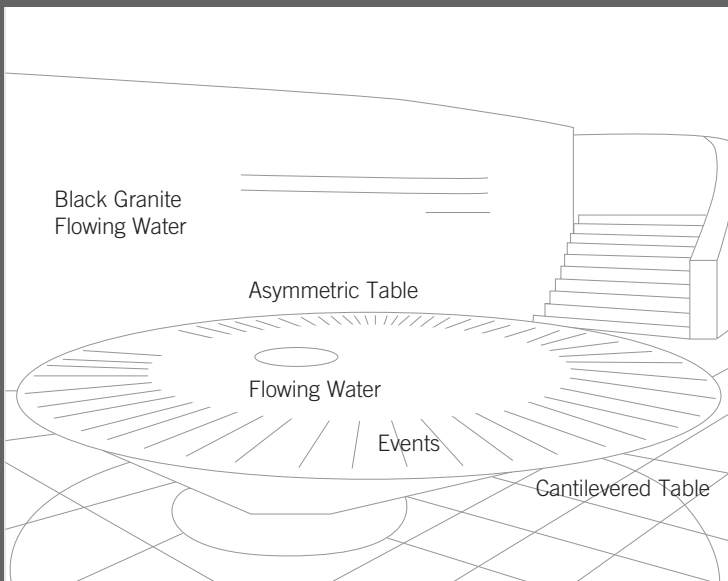
Good storytelling experiences generally require certain fundamental elements. While additional elements can be added to further augment the quality of a story or storytelling experience, they can rarely be subtracted without detriment. The fundamental elements are:

- *Setting*—The setting orients the audience, providing a sense of time and place for the story.

- *Characters*—Character identification is how the audience becomes involved in the story, and how the story becomes relevant.

- *Plot*—The plot ties events in the story together, and is the channel through which the story can flow.

- *Invisibility*—The awareness of the storyteller fades as the audience focuses on a good story. When engaged in a good movie or book, the existence of the medium is forgotten.

- *Mood*—Music, lighting, and style of prose create the emotional tone of the story.

- *Movement*—In a good story, the sequence and flow of events is clear and interesting. The storyline doesn't stall.

Use storytelling to engage an audience in a design, evoke a specific emotional response, or provide a rich context to enhance learning. When successfully employed, an audience will experience and recall the events of the story in a personal way—it becomes a part of them. This is a phenomenon unique to storytelling.

See also Framing, Immersion, Personas, Stickiness, and Wayfinding.

[1] The seminal work on storytelling is Aristotle's Poetics. Additional seminal references include, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell, Princeton University Press, 1960; and *How to Tell a Story; and Other Essays by Mark Twain*, Oxford University Press, 1996. A nice contemporary reference on visual storytelling is *Graphic Storytelling* by Will Eisner, Poorhouse Press, 1996.

Setting
Milestone events of the civil rights movement are presented with their dates and places. The memorial sits within the greater, historically relevant context of the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama.

Characters
The civil rights movement is a story of individual sacrifice toward the attainment of a greater good. Key activists and opponents are integral to the story and are listed by name.

Plot
Events are presented simply and concisely, listed in chronological order and aligned along a circular path. Progress in the civil rights movement is inferred as cause-effect relationships between events. No editorializing—just the facts.

Invisibility
The table is cantilevered to hide its structure. The black granite is minimal, providing maximum contrast with the platinum-inscribed lettering. The structure is further concealed through its interaction with water, which makes it a mirrored surface.

Mood
The table's asymmetry suggests a theme of different but equal. The mirrored surface created by the water on black granite reveals the story in union with the reflected image of the viewer. The sound of water is calming and healing.

Movement
The flow of water against gravity suggests the struggle of the civil rights movement. As the water gently pours over the edge, the struggle is overcome. Simile becomes reality as water rolls down the back wall.

The Civil Rights Memorial
Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama