

## STORYTELLING IN SAFETY TRAINING

By Morgan M. Bliss & Jeff Dalto

There are many reasons to add storytelling to your current safety training mix. For starters, learners are less likely to tune out of training that is diverse in approach, and that diversity aids retention and comprehension.

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### In addition, when people listen to a story,

they often become active participants in the storytelling. They identify with the characters and try to anticipate events and consequences. This active participation is like a low-fidelity simulation, with the learner creating neural connections and learning as the story unfolds. Finally, people are just naturally interested in stories, from ancient epics to the latest streaming television series. Why not tap into this natural interest for safety training, which can often be dry, difficult or complex?

### Creative Nonfiction

One form of storytelling that is often used in safety training is creative nonfiction. Gutkind (2012) describes creative nonfiction as "the literature of reality" (p. xvii), wherein the storyteller uses facts about a real person or event to recreate scenes, actions and consequences in a dramatic fashion. By definition, creative nonfiction must be a true event and be as factually accurate as possible. If elements of the person or event are unknown, and the storyteller makes them up for the sake of convenience, the story is no longer nonfiction, but fiction.

The stories you tell can come from your own experience. You can also borrow stories from sources such as an injury or fatality investigation from OSHA or CSB. While you can tell stories that happened to people you know, remember that when telling the stories of others there is a strong ethical component to creative nonfiction. You may have a compelling story to tell, such as a near-hit or a fatality, but unless it is your personal story, you should ask permission from the people involved in the incident before telling the story and stick to the truth as well as you or others involved can remember.

### Types of Creative Nonfiction

You can use several different types of creative nonfiction in safety training, although the three types you may find most useful are flash fiction, anecdotes and vignettes.

As Smith (2017) says, flash fiction can also be called microfiction or sudden fiction, and generally ranges from 140 characters to 1,000 words in length, averaging 100 to 300 words. Hart (2011) describes an anecdote as a "little narrative arc" (p. 87) that gives a learner insight into a real person's character. Vignettes, on the other hand, consist of a single scene that provides a "slice of life that reveals something universal" (p. 206). When reading the following example story, try to determine which type of creative nonfiction it is.

### Example Story

Imagine you are facilitating a training session on selecting and inspecting hard hats. You could start with some dry material about standards and types, and why we wear hard hats. Or, you could start with a story. The following story is color-coded to identify the elements of a story in the next section.

**Glaring** at the pile of hard hats in front of **her**, **Morgan shook her** phone, as if this would somehow improve the slowly loading search results. *Type I? Class E? Is that written somewhere on this thing?* **She** had only briefly scanned the contractor safety manual, assuming it would be just like any of the others, jotting this on **her** field notes: *ANSI Z89.1 Type I Class E hard hat. Crinkling* the plastic wrapping around one of the hard hats, **she peered** at the tiny instructional language printed on the wrapping, trying to see through to the interior label.

**"Uh, excuse me?" Morgan** called to a passing **customer service worker**, who **sauntered** over. **"Is there a way to tell what type of hard hat this is?"**

He **plucked** it out of **her** hands, **turning** it over and over. "There are different types?"

### Essential Elements of a Story

Each story has recognizable elements, some of which you may already be familiar with.

Structure is the story's narrative arc. According to Hart (2011), a complete story includes five phases: exposition, rising action, crisis, climax (resolution) and falling action (denouement). In exposition, we learn who the characters are and what they are trying to do. For rising action, we create the dramatic tension by presenting the characters with a crisis, a problem that will keep them from their goal. The story should reach a climax by resolving the crisis. The falling action is used to tie up loose ends in the story and answer questions. In the example story, the narrative arc is not complete.

**Point of view** is used to identify whose story is being told. This can be done using first person, second person, third person or omniscient viewpoints. The example story is told in the third person from Morgan's point of view.

**Characters** are the people in the story. Characterization is used to explore the personality, values and desires or wants of the characters. In the example story above, we can tell the protagonist is polite, seems busy and relies on her phone.



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Scenes describe the setting where the action is happening. One of the most difficult things in storytelling is determining which scenes are most important to tell the story. The example story is only one scene. Is it the best scene to start with? Should we have described Morgan reading the contractor safety manual? Should we have skipped this and started the scene when she got back to her office and asked a friendly project manager whether she bought the right hard hat? These questions are left to the storyteller.

**Action** is whatever the character is doing or thinking in pursuit of his/her goal. According to Hart (2011), something must happen in the first line of narrative. In the story above, the character is glaring at a pile of hard hats, shaking her phone and trying to select the right hard hat.

**Dialogue** is what the characters say. In creative nonfiction, you may need to reconstruct a dialogue, since it may use remembered conversations. You can also provide the character's thoughts (in italics or another similar method) to provide context for decision making. The example story uses both to show that neither Morgan nor the customer service worker know how to find the information.

Narrative is the bulk of the story. According to Gutkind (2012), you should only provide the information the learner needs in the moment. In the example story, we did not need to tell the name of the client, the name of the home improvement store, what project Morgan is working on or why she needs the hard hat because those elements are not relevant to this scene.

The story is an example of flash fiction. The story could resume as the training continues, explaining the different types of hard hats and where to find the information.

### Using Stories in Safety Training

Consider using storytelling to make training more relevant, assist with comprehension of technical content, influence desired post-training behavior changes

or reinforce behavior changes that may be failing after initial acceptance. There is no limit to the type of story you can tell, but it should be relevant to the training topic and support the training message.

A few well-known narrative arcs work well for capturing the learner's interest and creating behavior change. First is the challenge plot, in which the character overcomes great odds or difficult obstacles. Second is the connection plot, in which a character (or group of people) bridge a gap, create a relationship or otherwise make a previously unrecognized connection. Third is the creativity plot, in which the protagonist makes a great mental breakthrough, solves a complex puzzle or mystery.

### Conclusion

Storytelling can be a powerful tool for engaging learners, helping them internalize content and also for influencing behavioral change. Hart (2011) explains that storytelling shows us how actions lead to other actions and consequences, working through cause and effect. Heath and Heath (2007) take this a step further, identifying how story gives learners "simulation (knowledge about how to act) and inspiration (motivation to act)." OSH professionals should consider using storytelling to amp up their training so that learners feel empowered in their decision-making skills and knowledge. **PSJ**

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