



Storytelling: concepts and frameworks

When were your students last captivated by your teaching, connected with the concepts you introduced, or deeply motivated to act on the learning experiences you designed?

Storytelling is one of the most effective ways of engaging and communicating with learners because it provides meaning and context to enhance learning. Stories encourage students to connect with content emotionally so that concepts stay with them much longer than facts or statistics. Even when students have had little experience with the content being taught, telling a story gives a sequence to information and makes it easier to understand and learn. Excellent storytelling will ensure that any concept you teach will be remembered for years to come.

Take advantage of the power of storytelling in your online teaching. This Guide introduces the storytelling process, as well as a range of approaches to storytelling. Subsequent Guides in the Storytelling series will provide a worked example of storytelling as well as a template to design and present your own story.

Why use storytelling?

Everyone loves a good story. That's why using storytelling techniques in your teaching is so effective—your learners can't help but pay attention!

Stories bring information, knowledge, and truth to life. Weaving stories into your courses connects with your learners emotionally and brings you a step closer to them believing in the value of your content; you are motivating them to want to learn even more.



How do I go about storytelling?

Below are some storytelling tips that can help you strengthen your narratives and engage your students:

The key rule of telling stories

Give your students an emotional experience. Purposeful stories that reach their hearts and minds are those that move them to action. Experts say that the most effective and efficient way to do that is through metaphor and analogy. These linguistic devices are key components of the way we think and are the building blocks for the structure of knowledge. They can be used to evoke images and engage memory through rich sensory and emotional associations, which bring the learner into the story, cognitively and emotionally, as an active participant.

Stories don't have to be long

Stories don't have to be lengthy – shorter snippets catch a learner's attention more easily. When teaching, you often use scenarios, anecdotal evidence or an experience you once had to get your message across to students. These are forms of storytelling and engage students more fully by putting ideas or concepts into a real-world context.

Remember the main elements of storytelling

Every good story has a curve, where you introduce the characters or scenario, followed by the problem or conflict, which leads to the resolution. Your storyline also involves a plot that develops throughout the narrative, to connect your learners emotionally to the content. This encourages students to be immersed within the story so that it becomes an effective learning tool.

Choose a clear central message

A great story usually progresses towards a central moral or message. When crafting a story, you need to have a definite idea of what you're building toward. If your story has a strong moral component, you'll want to guide students to that message. If you're telling a funny story, you might build toward a twist that will leave your students in stitches. If you're telling an engaging story, try to increase the dramatic tension and suspense right up to the climax of your narrative. Regardless of what type of story you are telling, it's important to be very clear on the central theme, knowledge or plot point that you are building your story around.

Know your ending before you begin

Before you tell a story, know the ending. Know where you are going so your story doesn't ramble and confuse students. Good storytellers start at the end and work backwards when they begin to formulate their story. As you prepare your story, pick the ending first. Write it at the end of a timeline and work backwards. Make sure that each part of the story is essential to the ending. Each character, point, or principle must somehow relate to the main point you are trying to get across to your students.

Keep it simple

The details in the story need to contribute to the overall point. Any details outside of that can dilute the lesson. Keep sentences short and concise, so they are easy to follow. Keep the story short so it is easily read, viewed or heard.

Take advantage of the power of conflict

The biggest element of a story is conflict. Conflict is dramatic. At its core, a story is about a conflict between our expectations and cold reality. A story is about imbalance, opposing forces or a problem that must be worked out.

Have a clear structure

There are many ways to structure a story, but the three ingredients a story must have are a beginning, a middle, and an end. On a more granular level, a successful story will start with a provocative incident, lead to rising action, build to a climax, and ultimately settle into a satisfying resolution.

How do I incorporate stories in my teaching?

Now that you are aware of some of the main tips, have a look at the four different storytelling frameworks outlined below and choose one to begin your storytelling teaching strategy:

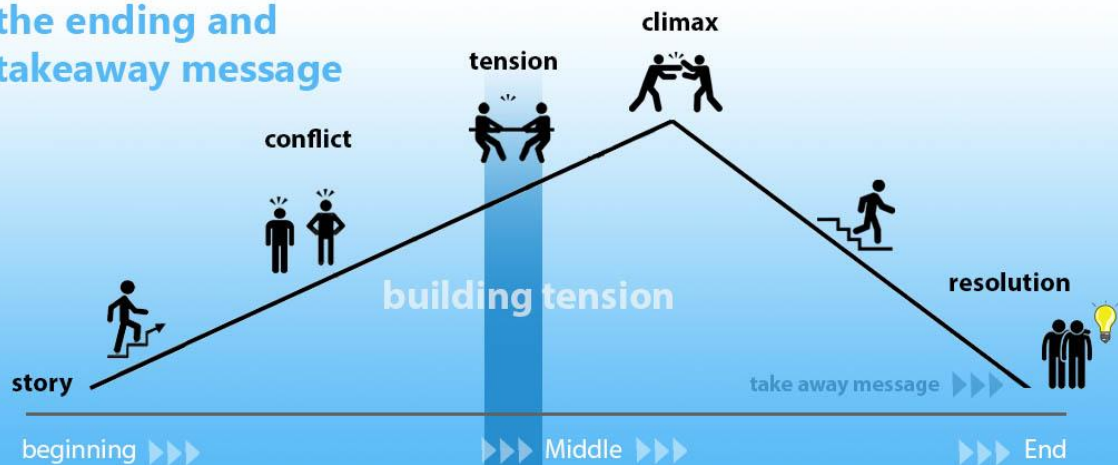
- [Framework 1: You create the story](#)
- [Framework 2: The student decides the ending](#)
- [Framework 3: Overarching storyline](#)
- [Framework 4: The students tell the story](#)

Framework 1: You create the story

This story-format has a beginning, middle and end. The conflict builds to a climax and a resolution is reached at the end.

You could use the story to introduce a topic, as an example to support a topic, or to sum up a topic. The story could be used at the start of a lecture where you advise your students that at the end of the lecture you will ask them to explain how the story illustrates an aspect of the lecture content just covered. This encourages active listening and critical thinking skills.

Storyteller creates the ending and takeaway message



The Concept: The concept tells us what the story is about—the core idea of the story. It should include the main person or characters in the story, the setting, a hook and the basic conflict.

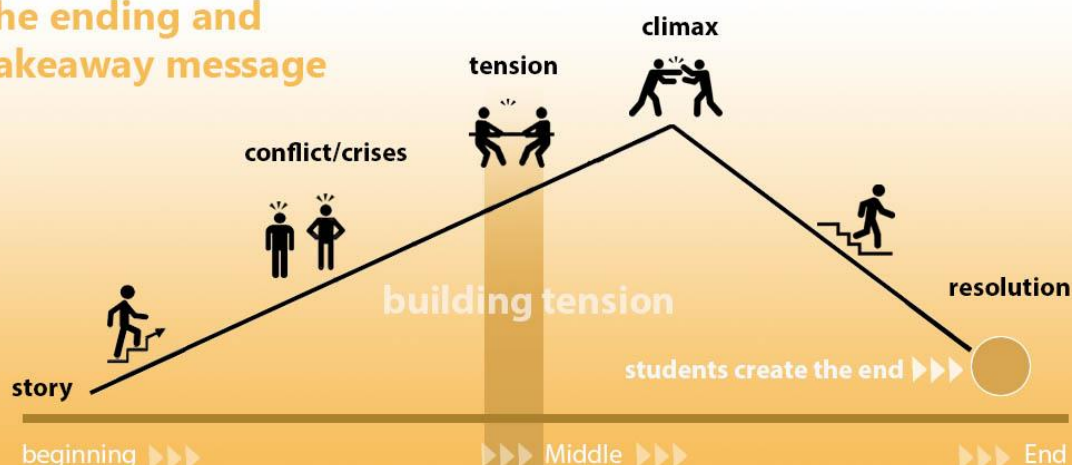
<i>The Beginning</i>	<i>The Middle</i>	<i>The End</i>
<p>The human element. Create a hook at the beginning of your story</p> <p><i>The hook:</i> Start your story by creating a problem or incident to engage your learners. This is where you introduce the character(s) they can relate to, and the context of your story.</p> <p><i>Rising conflict and tension:</i> The tension should set up the central conflict of the story and the main character(s) who accept the call to action.</p> <p>A series of events or complications need to occur, leading to an increase in tension. This is also where the characters change and grow as they deal with the conflicts they face. You need to build the tension and bring them to a point of no return. Some of the minor crises could be temporarily resolved, but the story continues in the direction of the major crisis, or climax.</p>	<p>The story develops through a series of complications and obstacles, each leading to the climax</p> <p><i>The climax:</i> This is the main conflict or the highest point of tension in your story. It needs to be the most difficult moment for your character, so make it count. It is the moment the action of the story turns toward the conclusion.</p> <p><i>The falling action:</i> The conflict slowly but surely moves towards a resolution. Your character takes a course of action towards the identified goal. This is where you further flesh out your core message, describing how it helps resolve the problem(s) you introduced early on.</p>	<p>Make your ending strong with an important take away point</p> <p><i>The resolution (the takeaway point):</i> After building the conflict, offer your students a reprieve by providing a satisfying resolution.</p> <p>When the problem or conflict is resolved, it usually leads to the personal growth of one or more characters.</p> <p>The ending is the final point your students will <i>hear</i>. This is where you give the answer to your story's main question, thus resolving the conflict and bringing the story to a satisfying close. Whatever points and/or principles are most important, put them at the end, as your takeaway message - to drive the point home.</p>

Framework 2: The student decides the ending

This story-format has a beginning and a middle but your students are expected to develop the ending or resolution.

This activity could be done individually or as a group activity. It encourages students to explain the connections between the story and the teaching content.

Student group creates the ending and takeaway message



The Concept: The concept tells us what a story is about—the core idea of the story. It should include the main person or characters in the story, the setting, a hook and the basic conflict.

<i>The Beginning</i>	<i>The Middle</i>	<i>The End</i>
<p>The human element. Create a hook at the beginning of your story</p> <p><i>The hook:</i> Start your story by creating a problem or incident that immediately engages the students. This is where you introduce the character(s) that your learners can relate to, and the context of your story.</p> <p><i>Rising conflict and tension:</i> The tension sets up the central conflict of the story and the main character(s) who accept the call to action.</p> <p>A series of events or complications then occur, leading to an increase in tension. This is also where the characters change and grow as they deal with the conflicts they face. You need to build the tension and bring it to a point of no return. Some of the minor crises could be resolved along the way, but the story continues in the direction of the major crisis, or climax.</p>	<p>The story develops through a series of complications and obstacles, each leading to a climax</p> <p><i>The climax:</i> This is the main conflict or the highest point of tension in your story. It needs to be the most difficult moment for your character/s, so make it count. It is the moment when the action of the story turns toward the conclusion.</p> <p><i>The falling action:</i> The conflict slowly but surely moves towards a resolution. Your character takes a course of action towards the identified goal. This is where you flesh out your core message, describing how it helps resolve the problem(s) you introduced earlier.</p>	<p>Provide your students with hints as to what the ending could or should be</p> <p><i>The resolution (the takeaway point) created by the students:</i> The problem or conflict is resolved, usually leading to the personal growth of one or more characters.</p> <p>The ending is what your students are expected to <i>develop</i>. You will know the answer to your story's main question or conflict. Hopefully your students will come to the same conclusion, resolve the conflict and bring the story to a satisfying close. However, don't be surprised if your students come up with an unexpected ending! You could finish the learning experience by introducing several 'how' or 'why' questions about the story. This could also be part of the learning activity.</p>

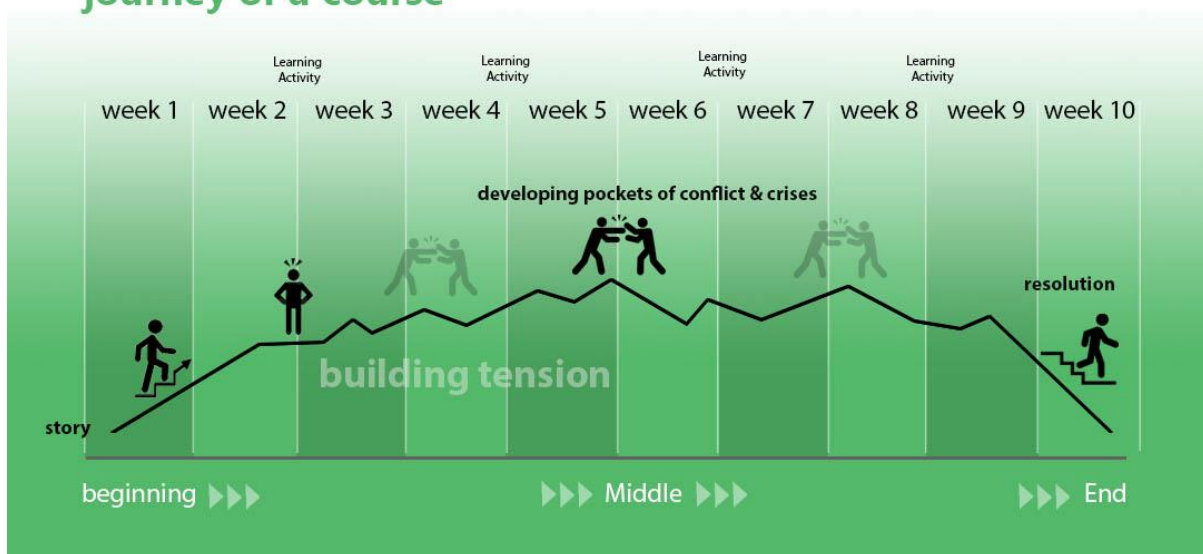
Framework 3: Overarching storyline

This story-format has a beginning, a middle and an end but is used as an overarching storyline for the entire course.

It could be aligned with weekly concepts, topics and learning.

This framework will need more planning, but it can incorporate shorter narratives for each week that contribute to the overarching storyline. You may require videos or audio to enhance this larger narrative structure.

Storytelling throughout the journey of a course



The Concept: The concept in this story-format tells an overarching story that runs throughout the course incorporating weekly sub-concepts. It has a beginning, middle and an end or resolution, but, the story's conflict/crises will branch out and sub-plots introduced. These could incorporate the weekly concepts that align with learning activities.

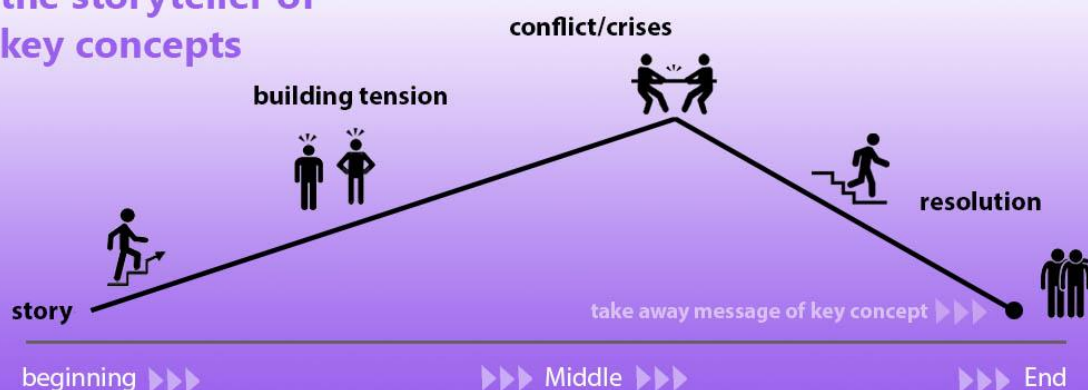
<i>The Beginning</i>	<i>The Middle</i>	<i>The End</i>
<p>The human element. Create a hook at the beginning of your story.</p> <p><i>The hook:</i> Start your story by creating a problem or incident to instantly engage your students. Introduce the context of your story and characters your students can relate to.</p> <p><i>Rising conflict and tension:</i> The tension should set up the central conflict of the story and the main character/s who accept the call to action. A series of events or problems occur, leading to an increase in tension. The characters change and grow as they deal with the conflicts they face. You build in the tension and bring them to a point of no return. Some of the minor crises can be resolved along the way, but the story continues in the direction of the major crisis, or climax.</p>	<p>The story develops through a series of complications and obstacles.</p> <p><i>The body of the story:</i> The bulk part of the story has many conflicts and crises (sub-plots) that align with the course's weekly topics. They are the sub-sections to the main story and could be combined with the weekly learning activities</p> <p><i>The falling action:</i> The conflict slowly but surely moves towards resolution. Your character(s) take a course of action towards the identified goal. This is where you further flesh out your core message, describing how it resolves the problems you introduced earlier.</p>	<p>The resolution to the story</p> <p><i>The resolution (take away point):</i> After building the conflict over many weeks, offer your students some reprieve by giving them a satisfying ending to the overarching storyline (you should also do this with the sub-plots you have created along the way).</p> <p>The problem or conflict is resolved near the end of the course. The ending might not need a take-away message, but rather a resolution or finality to the story.</p>

Framework 4: The students tell the story

The story-type still has a beginning, a middle and an end but the story is created by students.

Storytelling can offer opportunities for collaborative group work, the group acting as the storyteller of key concepts. It gives students the opportunity to reflect on content and to think about its application. It will encourage students to move from being individual learners to seeing themselves a part of a community of learners and will encourage them to collaborate and unpack the concepts being taught.

Student group as the storyteller of key concepts



The Concept: The concept in this format is the weekly topic, concepts or information you have presented in your lecture for that week. You ask students to create their own story using the concepts/information you have given them to demonstrate their knowledge and put it into a working scenario. Below are elements you can introduce to your students to use in their story.

<i>The Beginning</i>	<i>The Middle</i>	<i>The End</i>
<p>The human element. Create a hook at the start of your story</p> <p><i>The hook:</i> Start your story by creating a problem or incident that immediately engages the learners. This is where you introduce the character(s) that your students can relate to, and the context of your story.</p> <p><i>Rising conflict and tension:</i> The tension sets up the central conflict of the story and the main character(s) who accept the call to action.</p> <p>A series of events or complications occur, leading to an increase in the tension. This is where the characters change and grow as they deal with the conflicts they face. You need to build the tension and bring it to a point of no return. Some of the minor crises could be resolved along the way, but the story continues in the direction of a major crisis, or climax.</p>	<p>The story develops through a series of complications and obstacles</p> <p><i>The climax:</i> This is the main conflict or the highest point of tension in the story. It should be the most difficult moment for any character, so make it count. It is the moment when the action of the story turns toward the conclusion.</p> <p><i>The falling action:</i> The conflict slowly but surely moves towards a resolution. Your character(s) take a course of action towards the identified goal. This is where you flesh out your core message, describing how it helps resolve the problem(s) you introduced earlier.</p>	<p>The resolution to the story</p> <p><i>The resolution (take away point):</i> After building the conflict, you should provide a satisfying resolution. The problem or conflict is resolved, usually leading to the personal growth of one or more characters.</p> <p>The ending is where you give the answer to your story's main question or resolve the conflict and bring the story to a satisfying close. Whatever points and/or principles are most important, put them at the end, as your takeaway message - to drive the point home.</p>

Help and support

If you would like to ask online teaching and learning questions related to your course, you can look through our [FAQs](#), write to TIU@unisa.edu.au, have an [online consultation with a member of the TIU](#) or complete the online modules as part of [*Introduction to Engaging Learners Online*](#).