

Stories in Action

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Stories play a ubiquitous and central role in social and political life, but they are rarely used to elicit public interest and engagement in government policy. Instead, policymakers rely primarily on tools such as incentives and prohibitions. In this issue of *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* ([Volume 23, Issue 3](#)), James Walsh, Naomi Vaida, Alin Coman, and Susan T. Fiske explain how stories may complement established policy tools. The researchers define the elements of storytelling and discuss stories' key features and functions, contrasting them with other forms of communication. They also provide design principles for policymakers interested in building stories.

What makes a good story?

Historically, stories have played a key role in the development of society. They are “in fact a vital communication tool that people use to pragmatically solve a host of social and developmental problems—from teaching children to read to coordinating large-scale social activities,” Walsh and colleagues write.

Cognitive psychologists have studied how mental representations of stories differ from those of other forms of communication. First, what are the “ingredients” of a story?

- **Events:** Stories are concerned with particular events set in a time and place. The most compelling events are concrete (e.g., “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away ...”).
- **Agents:** Stories have protagonists whose desires, beliefs, and actions propel the narrative. Stories invite the audience to take on the protagonists’ perspectives, thereby engaging with subjectivity and allowing for multiple perspectives.
- **Causal sequences:** Stories usually portray a coherent organization of events as they unfold. Plots engage the audience by resolving uncertainty and relating to human life.

On the basis of these ingredients, researchers studied the underlying structure of a good story. In 2020, Boyd and colleagues (cited by Walsh et al., 2023) analyzed millions of texts and found that stories generally establish concreteness early on by staging events (i.e., the where and when of the events, the characters, and their relationships). In terms of agency, they found that stories typically start with low levels of cognitive tension (a proxy for agency), and these levels build and climax in the middle. Finally, the causal sequence, or plot, tends to develop progressively through the text and climax at the end. These features invite the audience to engage with stories’ subjectivity and process their coherence against an internal narrative logic. This contrasts with forms of communication that often present information in an objective manner and invite audiences to evaluate their content against logical or empirical standards.

These core characteristics of stories inform the mechanisms of narrative impact that make stories engaging and allow people to extract meaning from them. These mechanisms are:

- **Transportation and engagement:** The audience becomes cognitively and emotionally immersed in the story. Elements such as suspense, perceived realism, emotional involvement, and flow contribute to transporting the audience into the story world.
- **Identification:** The audience feels a connection with the characters, whose likeability, similarity to the audience, and points of view tend to strengthen this identification.
- **Meaning-making:** The audience extrapolates from the story to their own lives and decisions. The use of causal junctures signals cause-and-effect relations between events and contributes to encoding and understanding a story, facilitating meaning-making.

The functions of stories

A good story can modify people’s behaviors, choices, and beliefs. “Stories have served a social function for thousands of years,” Walsh and colleagues explain. “Today, they aid a diverse array of goals—teaching children to read, persuading people to have safer sex, and inculcating national myths that bring polities together.” These functions can be categorized as learning, persuasion, and collective action.

- **Learning:** Stories extend social learning and play a large role in teaching children as well as adults. For instance, watching a tv show with a storyline about debt can increase financial knowledge and reduce gambling behavior.
- **Persuasion:** Stories change attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. They can be more effective than

other persuasion tools because they reduce reactance (when a persuasive message backfires because the audience feels it reduces their freedom or pressures them to change). With a story, a persuasive message can be embedded in the plot without the audience feeling targeted by the message. Moreover, stories can change behaviors subconsciously—people may mimic behaviors they see in a story. For example, Walsh and colleagues cite a study in which Nigerian participants who watched a soap opera with health content became more likely to get tested for HIV than their counterparts who watched a soap opera without health content (Banarjee et al., 2019).

- **Collective action:** Stories can overcome coordination challenges (when the relative payoffs from one person's actions are affected by others' actions) and social dilemmas (when it's in the best interest of groups to cooperate but of individuals to defect). Stories affect collective action by helping to establish common knowledge, expectations, explanations, reputations, and shared identities.

Stories and the public interest

Given the persuasive power of stories and the interest and engagement they foster, Walsh and colleagues recommend that policymakers incorporate them into policy design to address collective issues such as climate change, social cohesion, or the economy. The researchers offer design principles for policymakers interested in building narratives:

- **Start with a problem.** Establishing an enticing event creates suspense and engages the audience.
- **Harness emotion.** A flow between positive and negative events increases realism and captivates the audience.
- **Manage expectations.** Effective stories balance fulfilling and violating the audience's expectations—without violations, the story is boring and predictable; with too many violations, it can be confusing.
- **Make stories concrete.** Vivid details help to transport people to the story world.
- **Leverage characters' identities.** Characters can discourage negative behaviors, encourage positive behaviors, or shift peoples' perspectives.
- **Mind the meaning.** Leveraging the story's causal logic can help to convey possible ways the world works.
- **Account for context.** Fitting the message to the task at hand—considering the length, medium, and format of the story—makes the narrative more engaging and efficient
- **Treat the truth with care.** Grounding stories in available knowledge and statistics helps to avoid spreading misinformation.
- **Show, don't tell.** If the stories feel like entertainment they will be more effective, whereas if they are perceived as burdensome they will likely lose their persuasive power.

About the authors ([PDF](#), [HTML](#))

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