



Alvin Hall '74 

TELL A GOOD STORY

FIRST, DOES THE STORY HAVE A HUMAN ARC?

Readers, listeners, and viewers are almost unconsciously open to stories that embody a journey into some aspect of humanity. The story doesn't have to be about actual people. It can be about polar bears in the Arctic, about a changing landscape, about the change in industry. What gets people interested is that the story relates to how human beings are created, grow, change, or leave this earth, along with the challenges, tension, or conflicts encountered along the arc. The story doesn't have to be a full arc from birth to death—it can simply be a section of it—but the audience must sense something human in it.

Second, the central question must be one for which the reader, listener, or viewer—whether they know it or not—wants to find an answer. This is true whether you are writing books about historical events or figures, about climate change, about music, about how to invest.

Typically, the answer to the central question is anticipated by a sequence of smaller questions. A good story anticipates the moments when the smaller questions are likely to emerge in the audience's mind. That's satisfying for the audience, but it also keeps people engaged with and interested in what's ahead.

Third, the heart of the story—be it a person, object, or idea—must be intriguing, multifaceted, and on a path likely to involve evolution or change, whether unexpected or logical in hindsight. Getting this right involves a deep understanding of what's germane to the character's personality, the physical location, the history of the object, or the created world. Equally important is determining how these innate characteristics will react to unexpected outside forces—whether real or created. The structure and sequencing of the story should gradually reveal these innards and keep the audience involved.

Fourth, and by far most difficult, is finding your distinct voice—the voice in which the story must be told to be effective. For nearly all storytelling, I find that my voice is clearest and most assured in the morning. Sometimes I wake up with the right voice and words just waiting to be written down or recorded. These are miraculous days. Some stories by their nature require that I be totally suffused with it to do it justice. The voice is still mine, and I can hear myself in the words, but the right words come to me through the subject itself. To find the right voice, you need patience. To paraphrase an old spiritual from my childhood, "It may not come when you want it, but it's right on time."

Alvin Hall '74 is an internationally renowned financial educator, television and radio broadcaster, bestselling author, and regular contributor to magazines, newspapers, and websites.