

Digital Storytelling: A Tutorial in 10 Easy Steps

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Expert tips on creating a polished, professional digital video

Digital storytelling is a craft that uses the tools of digital technology to tell stories about our lives. Done properly, storytelling can be a powerful, evocative, and emotional way of communicating themes and stories, often touching us in deeper ways than one-dimensional videos that rarely probe beneath the surface of people's lives.

The best such stories are at once both personal and universal. Storytellers may decide to create a work meant to be seen only by a few family members, but increasingly they're sharing their stories online with a wider community. It's remarkable how often these small snippets of life appeal to millions of us looking for meaning beyond the facile, artificial stories found on network television. In fact, we're discovering that we all have stories to tell.

Digital stories come in all sizes and shapes, from a simple video blog that recounts an interesting episode to a more sophisticated treatment that follows a narrative arc and relies primarily on images and found materials.

To create a polished digital story, it's best to sign up for a digital storytelling workshop, which can last from a few hours to several days and generally costs a modest tuition fee. However, not everyone in every country can attend such a hands-on workshop, so the steps below should enable you to create your story. (Of course, feel free to take shortcuts if you need to.)

I was first introduced to digital storytelling by two masters of the craft, Joe Lambert and Nina Mullen, who run the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California. Below are some tips culled from their workshop, from Lambert's book "Digital Storytelling," from another inspiring workshop run by Leslie Rule of KQED's Digital Storytelling Initiative (and a member of the Ourmedia Board of Advisors), and from my own observations among the family of digital storytellers.

To learn more, nonprofits can also purchase DVDs from BAVC's Interactive Learning Series, which cover Flash MX, digital storytelling, and video preservation techniques. All of the videos are available at a discount on TechSoup Stock.

Step 1: Decide on the Story You Want to Tell

You probably already have a person or subject in mind. Think small. Focus. Don't get caught up trying to convey all the aspects of someone's life — you're not writing the great American novel, you're creating what will optimally be a three- to five-minute work that recounts a personal tale and reveals a small truth.

What form should your story take? In their decade of leading workshops, Lambert and Mullen list these main varieties of digital stories:

- **The story about someone important.** Character stories center on a person who's touched you in a deep way. Often, these stories reveal as much about the narrator as about the subject of the piece. Memorial stories pay tribute to someone who passed on but left a lasting impression.

- **The story about an event in your life.** Travel stories — stories about a personal journey or passage — can be effective if they result in the narrator being transformed by the experience in some way. Accomplishment stories about achieving a goal, graduating from school, or winning an honor can easily fit into the framework of the desire-struggle-realization structure of a classic story.
- **The story about a place in your life.** Our sense of place serves as the focal point of a great many profound stories.
- **The story about what I do.** People find value in their work, hobbies, or social commitments and can weave wonderful stories from their experiences in each.
- **Recovery stories.** Sharing the experience of overcoming a tragedy, challenge, or personal obstacle is an archetype that always has the potential to move audiences.
- **Love stories.** We all want to know how someone proposed, met a spouse, experienced the birth of a first child, or came to terms with a parent. Exploring these kinds of relationships helps affirm our own.
- **Discovery stories.** These stories probe how we uncovered a truth or learned how to do something.

Now, choose one type of story that appeals to you.

Step 2: Gather Your Materials

Start collecting memories. The most powerful images are often discovered during a treasure hunt in the family attic. Start gathering old photos, vintage film reels, digital video, flyers, mementos — anything that holds emotional resonance. Don't think you have to go out and visually capture a story with a camcorder or camera. Use what you have! Older "found materials" usually prove to pack more of an emotional wallop than new footage.

Step 3: Begin Writing Your Script

Next, start jotting down ideas. Discuss your ideas with family and friends. Play out a rough story in your head.

Sketch out a script that you'll soon record with your own voice. Resist the temptation to take the easy way out and create a story with only images and music. People want to hear a personal voice. Don't be self-conscious about how your voice sounds; we all think we sound odd on tape.

Draft a short script. That's where many people get bogged down. Get past the fear of committing words to paper. Some tips:

- **Get personal.** Forget everything you've been taught about using a dispassionate, authoritative, essay-like voice. This isn't an essay contest. People want to hear your voice. The story must be told from your point of view.
- **Write lousy first drafts.** Don't edit as you go. Editing and writing use different parts of the brain. Let it spill out. Get the main elements of your story down on paper, then go back and edit later.
- **Write short.** You'll be surprised at how much you can convey with a few words and some key images.
- **Read your script aloud as you're fine-tuning it.** Eschew big, fancy words (like "eschew"); use plain speech.
- **Don't hold back.** Be real. You need to reach an emotional depth, and sometimes that can only be achieved by revealing uncomfortable truths. Ultimately, however, it's up to you to make a profoundly personal decision about what material you want to share — and with whom.
- **Look for a narrative arc for your story.** All stories — even three-minute gems — have a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning tells the premise of your story: it sets up the dramatic tension that should hold throughout the story. The middle outlines conflicts along

the way. The end is the destination, revealing a small discovery, revelation, or insight. This is sometimes called the desire-action-realization model. (But not by anyone we know!) Will the guy get the girl? Will the hero prevail? Will the sleuth solve the mystery? With a three-minute script, you don't have time to indulge detours. Get to the payoff.

- **Work on the pace.** Many consider pacing to be the true secret of successful storytelling. The rhythm and tempo of a story is what sustains an audience's interest. Experiment.

Lambert and Mullen write, "Good stories breathe. They move along generally at an even pace, but once in a while they stop. They take a deep breath and proceed."

- **Trust your voice.** All of us have our own distinctive style of storytelling. Trust yours. Read your script to a friend when you think you've finished. Very often, your confidant will point out glaring omissions, help firm up the language of a passage, or help you identify your true voice.

Step 4: Prep Your Equipment

You'll need to purchase or borrow these pieces of equipment:

- A desktop computer or laptop.
- Video software such as Apple iMovie, Adobe Final Cut Pro, Adobe Premiere, or another software application designed to help you tell stories.
- A (desktop) scanner, if you want to include traditional photos in your story.

Additionally, if you plan to record interviews, you'll need:

- A recording device: for video, a camcorder; for audio, a portable digital recorder like an iRiver or an analog cassette recorder (if you use analog video or audio, you'll also need to convert it to digital).
- A handheld microphone for audio interviews.
- Headphones.

The Interview Route

If you want to rely on found materials in the attic and add a narrative and musical voice-over, that's great.

Sometimes, though, you may want to conduct an interview with someone, most likely the subject of your story or her friends or relatives. Or, you may want someone to videotape or interview you. Either way, make sure you practice using your equipment before you sit down for the interview. Begin with some idle conversation. A minute or so after you begin, you may want to stop, rewind, and listen to the recording to make sure everything is working properly.

People like to see faces and hear voices. If you have enough photos of the story subject, snippets of an audio interview with the person can often add an interesting counterpoint to your voice-over narrative. Try to find a quiet location, or one that's appropriate to the subject. If you're recording video, make sure the lighting is bright enough to see the subject, but not so bright that he or she is washed out, as in direct sunlight.

In some cases, people find that talking into an audio recording device makes them self-conscious. Sometimes a friend can assist by interviewing you about the subject or person your story is about. Try using a digital recorder so that no conversion from analog tape to digital is required.

If you're interviewing another person, it's best to wear headphones while recording. Your headphones will tell you exactly what you'll hear in the finished recording. Adjust the microphone position for the optimum sound. The best setup typically involves moving the microphone between the questioner and storyteller. Hold it about seven inches from the speaker's mouth, and use a light touch to avoid the rumbling of mike-handling noise.

Feel free to ask questions spontaneously or to read from a prepared set of questions. Take breaks as needed. Don't make noise when the storyteller is talking, like, "uh huh?" or "really?" Instead, use visual cues like nodding your head. Make sure the storyteller's gaze isn't wandering off into a hundred directions.

If your story depends on your reading from a script while being videotaped, you might consider ponying up for one of the software programs that will scroll your script down the computer screen like a teleprompter. The \$250 ePodcast Producer from Industrial Audio Software is another option.

Step 5: Create a Storyboard

Professionals have used storyboards for decades to plot out the sequences of events that unfold in a movie, TV show, cartoon, or commercial. This is where you'll plot out your visual materials to make them align with your voice-over. (Some people feel more comfortable plotting out the images first before beginning the script, but go with what works for you.)

A storyboard is simply a place to plan out a visual story on two levels: 1) Time — What happens in what order? and 2) Interaction — How does the voiceover and music work with the images or video?

The easiest way to begin this process is with a small stack of index cards. Take each visual element that you plan to use and lay it out on your desk or kitchen table. Next, place a single index card below each image. On the index cards, jot down the main words that you'll be reading aloud as the image appears in the story; make sure that you give each element a chance to breathe rather than rushing through them in an effort to pack in more imagery.

A good rule of thumb is to use no more than 15 images and no more than two minutes of video. As a general rule, four to six seconds is the ideal time for an image to appear on-screen, though feel free to linger longer on a few key images. A handful of good images makes a more powerful story than a scattershot of random photos that fail to connect to the narration. If you get stalled writing your script, try jotting down thoughts on an index card next to an image and let the cards serve as your script. Just write one true thing, and the rest of the words will flow.

I highly recommend looking at successful short works to get a sense of the rhythm, pace, and economy of scale involved in digital storytelling; often you'll be surprised by how few images are needed to convey a story.

Step 6: Digitize Your Media

You can begin this process earlier, but be aware that the production work involved in creating a short personal story can take many, many hours. Set aside enough time to do it right.

If you're using old photos, you'll need a flatbed scanner. Scan them and save them to a single folder on your computer. If you're using digital photos, make sure they're in JPEG format. If you have old 16-mm film footage, you'll probably need to send it to a shop that specializes in converting analog film to digital video.

Keep in mind that your video will be horizontal in form, so crop accordingly. Don't distort vertical photos into horizontal ones, but realize that strong vertical shapes will appear with lots of black on both sides. Don't reduce the size of the image to the size your movie will

appear: You generally want them in the 720x540-pixel range; the details will be lost if you reduce them much further. But don't sweat the dimensions too much: Today all video-editing programs will shrink images down to their proper dimensions.

Step 7: Record a Voice-Over

You may decide that the microphone built into your laptop or desktop computer will suffice for recording your narration. If you want a more polished production, the Center for Digital Storytelling recommends:

- A 4-channel mixer.
- A condenser microphone (Shure, AKG).
- A boom microphone stand.
- An aspiration guard — a light covering over the microphone to prevent letters like p's from popping (optional).
- A microphone cable.
- A stereo-phono to stereo-mini cable.

The Center for Digital Storytelling recommends that you record your voice-over at the same quality level that you record your musical soundtrack: 16-bit, 44 kHz.

Many software programs are available to capture audio from an external sound source like a microphone. On a PC, these include the built-in Sound Recorder software, audio shareware, and several professional-level audio- and video-production software packages. The free, open-source program Audacity can capture sound from either a computer's built-in mike or an external microphone.

<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

Above all, speak slowly in a conversational voice. Don't make it sound like you're reading from a script.

Step 8: Add Music

Choose music that evokes the rhythm and pace of your story. For many people, this is the easiest part of the process. Most of us have soundtracks running in our heads that reflect the mood of the story we want to convey. The most effective tracks are often instrumental: classical, ambient, folk or jazz, with no vocals.

Next, go out and grab the music in digital form: Use a high-quality mp3 or rip a track from a favorite CD with one of the dozens of free CD-ripper programs on the market. (I prefer MusicMatch Jukebox.) If you're recording a friend performing original music, even better. Next, import the track into your video-editing program. If you're working in iMovie, when you import the MP3 you'll see it as an audio clip at the bottom of your timeline.

<http://www.musicmatch.com/>

Consider Copyright

If you plan on publishing your work to the Web, you're likely violating copyright laws if you use an entire song as the soundtrack to your video. (See Ourmedia's fair use guidelines.) It's much smarter to use podsafe music (and, no, the fact that you're not making money from your story makes no difference under copyright laws). The same rules apply when appropriating copyrighted snippets of television shows or old movies. Use Google to help you find podsafe video and audio.

<http://www.ourmedia.org/rules/fair-use>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podsaf>

Finding a talented friend to play an original work on the piano or by strumming the guitar also solves this problem.

Step 9: Edit Your Story

Make sure you have all the elements of your story in your video-editing program. If you haven't done so already, import all images, video, your voice-over, and musical elements.

Next, bring the images or videos down into the timeline to match the layout of your storyboard.

It's time to create an initial rough cut before adding transitions or special effects. The draft version gives you an overview of your project and spotlights areas where images or video are insufficient to carry the story.

Next, add titles to the beginning and end of your story. You may also want to overlay text onto an image or video. Avoid the urge to get too jazzy with typefaces or colors: Use a straightforward typeface that's easy to read.

Now comes the hard part: adding transitions — a simple cross-dissolve generally works best — and altering the length of each visual element to make sure it corresponds properly with the voice-over. Often, storytellers find that the "Ken Burns effect" on a Mac is a good way to add visual interest to an image, panning across and zooming into a photo to highlight an expression or important element.

The music is the last element to add (you may want to mute it until you're ready to tackle the soundtrack, usually by unchecking a small box in the timeline next to the music clip).

When you're ready to add music, iMovie's controls easily let you adjust the volume to reduce the music volume during the voiceover. It's generally best to fade the music to a low level but not to drop it out completely for the sake of continuity.

Expect to spend a few hours editing your story to get it just right. Don't overproduce: often the spontaneity and directness of the initial drafts get lost with too much polishing.

Step 10: Share Your Story

Almost finished! Now you need to produce your video in its final form. In iMovie, you can burn a DVD by launching iDVD. If you want to publish your story to the Web, choose Export>Expert Settings, click the Share button, and choose Export: Movie to MPEG-4. You can also export your file as an H.264 video for the iPod or as a QuickTime movie. I recommend MPEG-4 at a high bitrate of 500 or 600. Or, you can produce it as an H.264 video (the compression is stunning) and simply switch the format suffix from Apple's quirky .m4v to .mp4.

You can also create an online video with QuickTime Pro (which will run you about \$30) by choosing File>Export and follow the same steps as above. If you choose File>Share, QuickTime will compress your video as an email attachment. If you created your digital story in Premiere or another program, follow its instructions to export to the Web.

When you've finished compressing the final file, publish it to your blog or to a destination site such as Ourmedia. If you want to share it with just a few friends or family members, share it with SpinXpress, a private, secure peer-to-peer network. Or learn how to promote your videos to a wider audience by reading TechSoup's article *Share Your Nonprofit's Videos with the World*.

Share Your Nonprofit's Videos with the World

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