

**THE GMarie GROUP**  
Performance Improvement Specialists

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# Storytelling: Engaging Learners Using an Age-Old Instructional Method

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## Storytelling: Engaging Learners Using an Age-Old Instructional Method

If your training audience snoozes, your company loses. Keep your employees awake via an age-old instructional method that, if well-crafted, will keep your employees engaged.

**Storytelling** not only helps learners place new skills into identifiable contexts, but it also keeps learners wanting more. What happens to the hero? How does the story end? Did he find what he was looking for? And, if I do the same thing, will I benefit likewise?

### Elements of Storytelling

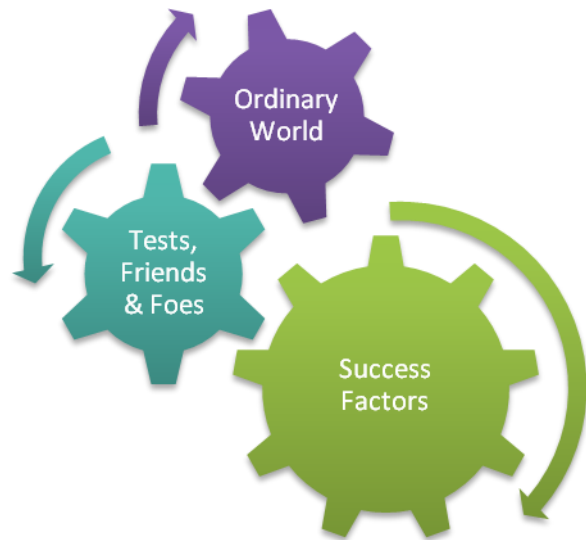
Stories can follow a variety of patterns. One of the most common story patterns used throughout history is [The Hero's Journey](#), in which a hero completes a twelve-phased journey.

[Joseph Campbell](#), the American mythologist who outlined The Hero's Journey based on his research of stories throughout history, summarized this storytelling approach:

“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”



While your training story may not follow all twelve phases of The Hero's Journey, your tale should include at least the following three elements: ordinary world; tests, friends and foes; and success factors.



### **Ordinary World**

Grab your audience's attention at the word "go," and you're likely to keep it as the story unfolds. Begin with a bold statement or question. Place a relatable character in an identifiable and uncomfortable situation.

Consider using characters and conflicts that your audience relates with — people who share similar circumstances, abilities and fears and situations that make your audience squirm in their seats or flip their eyes wide open in wonder. At the end of the beginning, your training audience should crave to know what happens next.

The start of your story should answer the following questions:

- What was this hero like before the journey began?
- How will the training audience relate to the hero?
- When called to adventure, how was the hero reluctant?

#### *Story Example Part 1: Ordinary World*

Mention Legal & Compliance to marketing manager Jake Hennings, and you're likely to hear a frown-deep disgruntled groan.

"We're working with tight deadlines here, and yet they take their sweet time combing through content they know nothing about," Jake complained to his team. "This campaign goes out in three days. Let's send this stuff to Legal again, but tomorrow we're printing these materials with or without their feedback."

The next day, as the clock ticked over Jake Henning's desk, the lines above Jake's eyebrows creased deeper. As expected, his team received no feedback from Legal & Compliance. By five o'clock, Jake huffed, picked up the phone and directed, "Go ahead and print. We're out of time."

As the campaign launch date approached, Jake tuned out the whiny voice in the back of his mind that nagged him to check with Legal & Compliance. "They had their chance," he reasoned, thumbing through the printed marketing materials on his desk.

### **Tests, Friends & Foes**

This is the "meat" of your story — when the hero is confronted with a series of challenges. Often, the hero faces three tests — passing some and failing others. In a training program, this is the perfect opportunity to illustrate how using key concepts and skills in the "real world" can help you overcome challenges at work. And, conversely, you can illustrate how NOT using them can lead to failure, embarrassment and other undesirable circumstances.

In the middle of your story, you should answer the following questions:

- What trials did the hero face?
- What friends and foes did he or she make along the way?
- How was the hero transformed through each test?

#### *Story Example Part 2: Tests, Friends & Foes*

Merely hours after he shipped the marketing materials, Jake found an urgent message from Legal & Compliance in his inbox. Jake sucked in breath as he opened the message, which identified two issues with the marketing materials. Not only did his team need to reword an un-provable claim, but they also failed to include a required disclaimer.

Frustrated, Jake slammed his hand on the phone, dialing the shipping company. "Stop shipment instantly," he demanded.

Jake knew what to do next, but he sat in his chair and sighed. He was simply not looking forward to the repercussions. After counting to five, he entered his boss's office and relayed the issue. After receiving a brief but powerful lecture, Jake gave in and trekked to Legal & Compliance feeling humbled and humiliated.

### **Success Factors**

At this point, the hero should have learned quite a bit from the tests, friends and foes of the previous section. Now, the hero gets to face the ultimate test and, hopefully — using the key concepts and skills in the training course — the hero will come out on top.

The finale of your story should answer the following questions:

- What was the hero's ultimate test?
- How did the hero succeed?
- Upon success, how did the hero help those around him or her?
- How is the hero's life different (compared to his or her "ordinary world") after completing this journey?

#### *Story Example Part 3: Success Factors*

"How can we fix this?" Jake asked the lawyer. Sensing Jake's urgency, the lawyer set down her work, rescheduled a conference call and addressed his needs. Together, they were able to revise the marketing materials, send them to printing and re-schedule shipment. Sure, it would ship a week later than planned, but at least it would be accurate...and legally sound.

During Jake's next staff meeting, he recognized Legal & Compliance for their diligence in helping divert a potential legal problem and help marketing rollout a successful campaign.

He never left them out of the loop again.

## Storytelling in Action



A leading entertainment and leisure company recently identified the need to convert existing instructor-led training courses to Web-based training. To help the employees visualize key telephone etiquette and customer service skills, the new WBT includes storytelling.

In fact, upon course launch, learners are greeted by a character that serves as a learning guide, **storyteller** and expert advisor throughout the learning experience. The learning guide highlights key skills and concepts through **telling stories about employees who performed job tasks poorly and those who performed them exceptionally**. The stories help reinforce understanding of on-the-job challenges and preferred behaviors for employee responses.

After having received a compelling overview of the content, the learners interact with scenarios. Throughout the scenarios, the character provides expert advice and feedback to learners — refreshing key concepts and introducing more detailed content via a discovery learning approach.

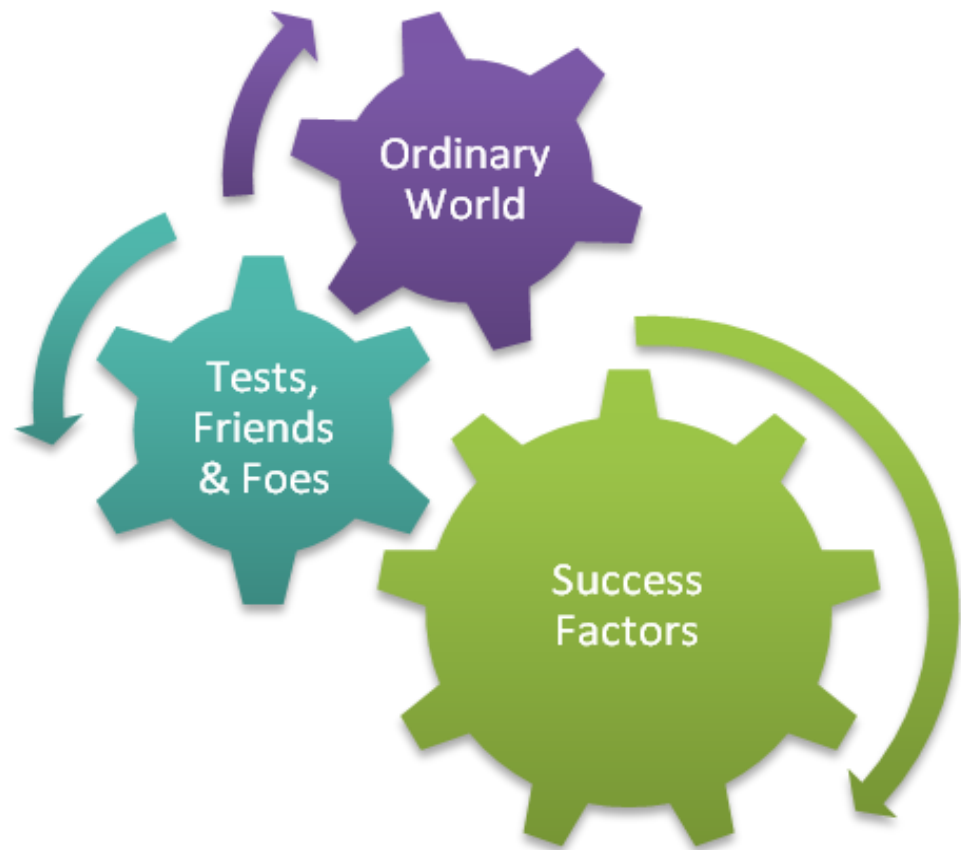


Upon completion of the scenarios, the character congratulates the learners for a job well done, recaps key content and offers an on-the-job challenge to motivate learners to apply what they learned in the WBT to their interactions with customers.

## Conclusion

While learners may prefer different instructional strategies and methods, storytelling seems to appeal to the majority of training audiences — keeping them awake and engaged. Storytelling not only catches learners' attention, but it also helps them visualize a skill or concept in a specific context as well as recognize how using key knowledge can help overcome identifiable challenges.

Consider using storytelling in your next training program, following this three-phase storytelling outline as a guide: ordinary world; test, friends and foes; and success factors.



## The GMarie Group

For over 20 years, The GMarie Group has provided nationwide clients with custom learning and performance improvement solutions. To do so, we apply the ADDIE Model, a systematic process for:

### **Analyzing Performance and Training Needs**

The GMarie Group recommends initiating a project through rigorous analysis, which is the key to obtaining valid results and ensuring that a significant cross-section of the organization has a stake in the process. We can conduct training needs and performance analysis to determine learning solutions to address identified performance gaps.

### **Designing and Developing Effective Solutions**

We design and develop online (Web-based) training, virtual Webcasts, podcasts, instructor-led training, performance support tools, learning portals and much more! Our team can author your custom product using any industry-standard authoring tool (e.g. Flash, Lectora, Flypaper and Captivate).

### **Implementing Products and Programs**

We also provide training program planning and coordination, train-the-trainer, training delivery and facilitation for all types of subject matter. We can also help integrate Web-based solutions into your LMS or LCMS.

### **Evaluating Reactions, Learning, Skills Transfer and Returns**

Using Kirkpatrick's "Four Levels of Evaluation," we develop tools and scoring mechanisms to measure participant reactions to learning, mastery of objectives, transfer of skills to the job and return-on-objectives.

## How may we help YOU?

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