Bar Insider

Where Science Meets Storytelling:
The Drama of Change

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The best stories usually revolve around sudden, unexpected change. The unsinkable ship strikes the iceberg as two ill-fated lovers embrace on the moonlit deck. A hapless summer swimmer plunges below the surface as the unseen shark drags her beneath. The runaway Kansas farm girl encounters the twister that swoops her away to Oz.

These memorable tales all share the flash of dramatic change that captures us audience members. Hollywood screenwriters and storytellers call this abrupt change by many names - inciting incident, hook, catalyst or call to adventure. And while these are all aptly descriptive titles, they don't tell us much about how or why the change so captivates us. A closer look at the science of dramatic change reveals many clues to the art of persuasive writing. We'll find that legal writing, in particular, profits from understanding the cognitive and evolutionary roots of change.

The human brain is an incessant story generator. At the center of its most unforgettable stories lies the moment of surprise. Just consider stories spun by our sleeping brains. Most dreams contain a singular surprise, shock or shudder. The classic "falling dream" is but one of countless examples. As we plummet from steps or ledge, our bodies spasm awake in reaction to the threat. We similarly lurch into consciousness from the monster under the bed. We are trapped, or drowning, naked in public or even caught in Dorothy's whirlwind. Our hallucinated nighttime models of the world terrorize and amaze us with sudden, unexpected change. And it is the kind of change we never forget.

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Stories we read and write work much the same way. Our brains convert sensory data from the page or screen into electrical impulses, which in turn build hallucinated models in our heads. Even as you scan the examples in the text above, your brain makes or recalls models of the images described. You almost surely saw in your mind's eye the disturbing vision of the falling dreamer's body or the shadowy creature under the bed, just as your recalled visions of the Titanic, Jaws and Dorothy in the opening paragraph. What makes those images so readily available, so automatic and memorable, is their suddenly changing dynamic. All was going well, until suddenly... and then the story really begins.

Sudden or unexpected change need not always revolve around mortal danger as in the example above. Consider Jack and The Beanstalk as an example of convincing and memorable dramatic change that does not immediately imperil the protagonist. Jack's world abruptly changes when he awakes to find the magic beans he threw out his window the night before grew into the sky, where adventure and possible redemption call. In this way, change can also signal the start of the protagonist's quest or journey, as Joseph Campbell so famously popularized with his Hero's Journey model of storytelling. But it is the eye-opening shift from Jack's ordinary worldview to the new and strange beanstalk outside his bedroom window that grips our imagination. At that point in the story, we have no choice but to read on; we must see what happens next.

From an evolutionary perspective, this hyper-focus on change makes perfect sense. We seek above all else to survive. Our drive to survive focuses our senses on our immediate physical surroundings, always scanning for anything that might endanger us. We are thus carefully tuned by evolution to detect and react to change. Consider our automatic response to the snake-like coil of rope on the garage floor or the breeze that carries the imagined sound of the crying infant. Our instinctual reaction – freezing at the illusory snake – has been encoded into our body's neural network by the evolutionary demands of survival.

For the legal writer who appreciates our survival instinct for detecting change, factual descriptions can take on an entirely new emotional and cognitive valence. First, we should turn away from the lawyerly habit of over-explaining or describing facts in favor of specific concrete imagery that evokes the senses, especially our senses of sight and sound. "The screaming black twister ripped Dorothy from the ground," triggers our sensory apparatus and models the imagined world much differently than, "The scary tornado removed Dorothy from her feet." These admittedly exaggerated examples illustrate why we should consider writing fact sections more like the filmmaker and less like the lawyer. One activates your eyes and ears while the other slows you down with abstractions. Don't say its scary. Make your reader feel scared.

Second, we should consider modelling our prose in the same way our brains model the world; that is, by sequencing change in the order we experience it. This is crucial because we don't wait until the end of the sentence to start creating an image in our head. "Cain smashed the rock onto Abel's head" builds an entirely different visual model in the mind's eye than, "Cain smashed onto Abel's head a rock." This minor difference in word order can vastly alter the reader's internal model, and thus their experience and interpretation of the text. Where we place words in sentences matters for how our readers construct visual mental models.

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Third, in similar fashion, active verb constructions create more accessible mental models for our readers. For the most part, we witness people acting on and in the world, not actions happening to people who are passively waiting around. The kind of change that most readily grabs our senses arises from perceived agency. We perceive somebody doing something to someone else, to put it crudely but accurately. Again, Abel's head isn't smashed by a rock. Rather, Cain smashes the rock into Abel's head.

Fourth, we achieve memorable visual models through immersive detail. We should be as precise and original as possible in our factual narration. Stock lawyerly phrases, clichés and over-worked metaphor should be replaced with clear, simple and concrete scene making. Studies show that we need at least three concrete qualities to create the memorable visions. The "ruby red slippers" works much better than "red shoes." But use this technique sparingly to highlight objects or scenes. Relevance matters as much as detail.

To test these writing principles, try composing your next factual recitation with one goal in mind – to show your reader only what can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted or touched in concrete, specific imagery. If you can't reveal a fact by invoking one of your reader's senses, then it doesn't make the first draft. Resist the temptation to fall back on explanatory prose that tells your reader what it was like to see something, or how it must have felt to experience an event, or how you interpret the relevant happening. Instead, light your reader's imagination through sight, sound and the other senses. Construct your sentences just like we model the world by sequencing the changes in the order your reader would likely perceive them. Employ active verb constructions to mark those changes. Lastly, aim for three concrete, descriptive qualities when spotlighting the change object, event or scene. In these ways, you'll likely convince your audience of the relevant facts because you have immersed the reader in a memorable visual model of the events you describe.

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