

Lesson 2:

First, tell me a story

by Nestor Walters

In the previous lesson, I encouraged you to be “That person,” to stand out, to be memorable by digging into the personal stories that only you can tell. At this point, you might be wondering: what even is a story?

Critics like to define stories as “an account of people and events told for entertainment,” “a sequence of character actions that has a beginning, middle, and end.” If you’re fantasy legend Neil Gaiman, “A story is anything that makes you ask ‘and then what happened?’”

But humans have been trading stories ever since fire was invented and we have an intuition that helps us separate a story from a car commercial. That intuition and craving for story is precisely what makes storytelling such a potent tool to build intimacy and connect people through time and distance, which is exactly what you want to do with your admissions officer.

Let’s jump straight into an example. Last year, I was helping my buddy with his business school applications. He insisted he didn’t know what to write about. I said look, just start with a story, a little bitty thing, from your SEAL training (SEALs love talking about how hard their training was).

This is what he gave me:

As early as I can remember, I found myself entranced by stories of heroes overcoming incredible odds, fighting for something they truly believed in. Movies such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *Braveheart* were among the many stories that

fueled this interest. As I grew older, many things changed, but those feelings that I grew up with remained intact. For me, joining the military was the obvious answer. I joined the Navy and eventually got orders to BUD/S. Powered by the dream of one day fighting alongside some of the world's most coveted warfighters, I made it through the grueling Navy SEAL training.

Initially, everything felt as I had always dreamed that it would. I had a sense of purpose. I felt important. As the years went on, I began to see things through a different lens. In a sense, I was disillusioned. War is not a story of good triumphing over evil, and there is definitely no hero. The military has a way of glamorizing the work that it does.

...and so on.

While there is nothing wrong with what he wrote, it feels more like a collection of general truths than a story. I'm curious about its narrator, but want to experience some highs and lows with him, and relate to him in something deeper than common movie interests.

I realized that I'd forgotten to define a crucial storytelling tool for my buddy: a scene.

A scene, as opposed to a story, can be defined. It's things happening at a specific place and at a certain time, to a specific person(s). For example:

For example, *I take the trash out every evening* is a statement, not a scene.

However

Yesterday, after dinner, I went out the back door to take the trash out and this one-eyed raccoon was pissing all over so I threw a bottle at him but he dodged it and lunged at me so I dropped the trash on the back porch and ran is a (slapstick) scene because action is happening with specific people (the narrator), place (back porch) and time (yesterday evening).

With that in mind, I gave my buddy an added prompt: start with “This one time, I [describe yourself], was at [the drying cages/chow hall/paddling a boat], and then...”

This is what he wrote (names changed):

This one time, in BUD/S, I was doing drag races with my boat crew in the soft sand of Gator Beach. The instructors made it interesting by telling us “it paid to be a winner.” During our final race, which we won, the guy next to me, Jack Benson, screamed violently. After the race I asked him what happened. He told me that he had pushed himself so hard that he “pooped in his pants.” As the boat crew leader, I had to figure out something quickly, so Jack didn’t have to suffer in his soiled shorts. So, when the instructors asked for me to report in, I screwed it up on purpose so they would send us into the surf. We then had to jump into the ocean, giving Jack the chance to clean his dirty pants. That was one of the first times I had to make a decisive decision as a leader, and [learned] that a person can defecate from working out.

You see how incredible this is? We get a taste of BUD/S (SEAL training), we get to see our character in action, see him adapt to challenges as a leader, and holy shit if we didn’t die laughing.

Now it’s your turn. Surprise yourself, let the words get away from you. Dig up those loofah-and-toothpaste boot camp tales you promised yourself you’d forget. Have fun, but don’t be afraid to get serious.

Tell me a story (100-250 words). Start with “This one time, at [...], I was [doing something/in a certain role], and [what happened]?”

Free association: boot camp, gear locker, flight deck, the range, canteens, stress cards, Camp Lejeune, the swamp near Camp Lejeune, the barber

shop near Camp Lejeune, the gentlemen's club near Camp Lejeune, medical, your rack, your sleeping bag, someone else's sleeping bag, beanie, buffer spring, cup of dip spit, etc.