

Transcript to Class 2:

Story Crafting

By Inspired Living Publisher Editor Bryna René

For your convenience, the following is the transcript to accompany Inspired Living Publishing's "Story Crafting" audio class hosted by Editor Bryna René.

About Editor Bryna René

Bryna René is an experienced editor, published author, yoga instructor, musician, photographer, and "general creative" with a passion for helping others live in greater awareness and joy. Her editing portfolio includes numerous successful non-fiction titles, including all of Inspired Living Publishing Best-selling print anthologies, *Inspiration for a Woman's Soul: Choosing Happiness, A Juicy, Joyful Life, and Embracing Your Authentic Self*. To learn more about Bryna and her current projects, please visit www.brynarene.com and www.wordsbyaphrodite.com.

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Hello and welcome. My name is Bryna René and I'm the Editor for all of the best-selling anthologies from *Inspired Living Publishing*.

Today's class, part two of this series, is entitled "**Story Crafting**." In this class, I'll give you some tips and techniques to make the process of crafting your story submission easier and more approachable.

Some of the topics we'll be covering today include:

Story arc: We explored the basics of story arc in our first class, but now we'll go a bit deeper into how a story arc can help you create flow from the start of your journey to the resolution of the story.

Tapping into the emotion of your story, and writing from a place of emotional connection.

Linear story flow, and the importance of the relationship between action and consequence in your story so that readers can easily trace how you got to where you are and how—and, consequently, how they can create a similar situation for themselves.

Making your story relatable, and what it means to write in the first person, from the "I" perspective, while bringing forward the common elements that enable people to connect with your story.

Becoming your own story heroine, and how to use that sense of empowerment to create a great submission.

Finally, I'll share some writing tips for creating your first draft.

First things first: story arc. Every story, no matter how short or how long, has an arc.

In fiction or traditional storytelling, the story arc might look a bit like an upside-down check mark. There's a long ramp that goes up and up and up, until the action builds to a critical peak at the climax of the story, when everything is seen clearly. Then, the resolution is a short, sharp drop-off, where all the loose ends are wrapped up. A lot of times, this reads as, "And they lived happily ever after, The End." You don't necessarily get a real look at what happens to the characters after the tension and focus of the plot have been resolved.

If you were to map out one of Inspired Living Publishing's teaching stories on a graph, it might look more like a bell curve. You start at whatever place you're beginning, and

then the action builds from that place. Because we're not working in a large or lengthy format, we don't want to go back and forth with a lot of backstory. We want to start in one place and then allow the story to rise and rise, and the tension to build until it reaches a critical point—the pinnacle of the bell curve.

For our purposes here, that critical point will be your moment of realization (as it relates to the theme of the book project), the point when something shifted that enabled you to see more clearly and to make positive changes. That moment is the climax of the story. After that, the line of the story starts to slope downhill. All of the actions and consequences triggered by the climactic moment take place in the resolution of the story.

In a teaching story, like the one you're writing for this project, we actually want to see equal or almost equal attention paid to the pre-climax and post-climax events in the story. We want to know how you got to the point where you experienced a shift—but we also want to know what happened after. What does the "happily ever after" really look like? What outward manifestations of your internal shift occurred, and how did your life change as a result?

To word it a little differently: In a teaching story, we want to pay equal attention to cause and effect.

So, where does your story arc start? From what point in your life journey are you going to start this narrative? It's a good question. Maybe the events which lead up to your moment of truth began in childhood. Maybe in young adulthood, or maybe in mid-life. The point at which your story starts is the point at which the "conflict" began. (The "conflict" is whatever was resolved by your moment of realization." Maybe an event triggered this, or maybe it was simply a thought or behavior that started a cascade of tension.

When you choose your story subject, you'll want to think clearly and objectively about what moments in your life are really relevant to your story. If the conflict you're writing about emerged when you were in your twenties, you probably don't need to give the reader an overview of your childhood. But if the conflict began when you were eight, you'll want to choose snapshots of your life from that point forward to illustrate the tension or pattern that is solved or eased at the climax of your story.

Once you have a basic idea of the arc of your story—your start and finish points, and that bell curve visual—you'll work on filling in the details. The events in your story should be presented in a linear timeline, not jumping back and forth too much. Backstory techniques can be very effective in writing, but since we only have about 1400 words to work with here, we want the story to be as clear and easy to follow as possible. So, let the events build up logically to the climax of the story, the change happens, and then events unfold in the resolution. (The exception to this is the "future self"

perspective we talked about in Class 1, but that should be used sparingly. So you still won't be jumping around too much.)

It's vital to find a balance between giving the reader enough information to deeply appreciate what you were feeling and experiencing during your time of tension, and overwhelming her with unimportant details. So my advice is to choose quality over quantity. Be really precise with what you choose to share—and what you do share, share deeply and intimately. What you're doing is the literary equivalent of choosing photographs for a montage. Each scene will reveal something about you and how you operate in the world. A well-written scene can draw the reader in and really hook them.

What makes a scene compelling? Action! Start your story with action. Drop you reader straight into the middle of your life, and let her come along for the ride. If you write honestly and with deep emotional connection, you won't have to TELL your reader about yourself; she will feel who you are through your words and actions on the page. By the time your breakthrough happens in the climax of the story, she will be so connected that she'll experience it right along with you.

It can be tempting to open and close the story with summary paragraphs, just to try to pack in more information about the "before" and "after." But that can make your story feel too much like an essay. Remember, as we talked about in the first class, we want to focus on the emotions of your story so the reader can relate; a list-like overview isn't likely to come across as emotionally charged. It's more important that the reader know how you felt than what you did.

Once you reach the climactic point of your narrative, don't let the emotional connection fizzle out. What you're doing in the resolution is unraveling the knot of tension that was created prior to your breakthrough. As we know, "happily ever after" is a process—so try to stay connected to the narrative even when the tension starts to ease. Sometimes the hardest part of a story to write can be the immediate post-transition emotion. Things have changed—but you're still in the thick of it. What did that feel like, in that no-man's land between old and new? In life, this is where many people turn back to the old—on that uncomfortable threshold of growth. What made you push through, and how did it feel?

That brings us to our next piece of the linear story flow: justifying your actions in your story. This is not a call for an apology for anything that you did or didn't do. In fact, it's just the opposite. In this context, "justifying your actions" means making sure the reader has enough information and perspective to fully understand your actions and the choices you made both before and after your shift.

For example, let's look at a very, very popular book, *Eat, Pray, Love*. The author picks up and moves to Italy for four months, then to India, then to Bali. But it's the opening

portion of the book, where she describes her divorce and all of the events that prompted her to make this choice, that provides context and relatability for the reader. If the book had opened with her living it up in Italy, you might have put it down after four pages, thinking, "Yeah, good for her, but who cares?"

If the beginning of your change-making process begins with a decision that seems at all out of the ordinary, like selling everything you own and moving overseas, or leaving a relationship, or changing your family structure, it's important for the reader to understand at least a little bit about why you made that choice. Otherwise, what happens is either the dreaded, "Who cares?", or a phenomenon we call "inference" on the part of the reader.

If you open your story with, "Five years ago I got divorced," but don't provide any other information, the reader will jump to her own conclusions as to why you got divorced. There are many reasons for divorce to happen, so if you don't share your personal reasons and explain why you made that choice, the reader is going to fill in her own reasons for your actions, based on her personal experience and/or clues from other parts of the story. This inference may or may not be accurate, but it will almost never help the reader connect more deeply with you and your story.

Rather than take chances with what the reader might insert in her own mind as she reads your story, we want to make sure that we have clarity as to the relevant events, and why you made the choices that you did. If you didn't know why you were making a choice at the time, write about the not-knowing! Even the explanation of acting on instinct is enough of a justification for most people to be able to say in their minds, "Oh, yeah, I understand that."

How do you make a solid connection with a reader? Emotion. One thing that we never want the reader to have to infer is how you were feeling at any point in your story.

How many times in our lives have we misinterpreted a situation or a person's actions based on our own inference about how they were feeling at the moment? Inference is complicated enough when we're dealing with face-to-face relationships. It becomes really alienating when you're dealing with it in terms of a written story. In order for the reader to connect deeply with you and what you're saying, you really want to make sure that you're not leaving the emotional impact of your story to chance.

You'll want to be clear, honest, and descriptive about how you were feeling at every stage of your journey, not just during the conflict before your climactic moment, but also during the "resolution" of your story. I think it's very important in a teaching story like this to be clear about that "readjustment" period we mentioned in the last section. Even when our moment of revelation is incredible and beautiful and life-changing,

there's often an uncomfortable period of transition before we settle into our new paradigm.

Perhaps in your experience, there was no transition. It was simply a moment of clarity and then everything shifted, and there was no backlash from that. If that's the case, then that's awesome, fantastic! But if that's the case, be sure that the resolution is still emotionally-charged enough for the reader to be able to connect to this new you.

What do I mean when I talk about bringing emotion into your story? One of the most common mistakes that new authors make is trying to tell a story by describing the place and the events that happened there. What makes a story interesting is the people in it—how they felt, and how they acted and reacted based on those feelings.

For example, maybe you grew up on a farm, and going home to visit for the first time after years away sparked a moment of realization. You can describe the old butcher block table or the wood burning stove or the rafters that are dark with age—but if the reader doesn't have a sense of how you *feel* about the things that you're describing, or why they're important to you, there won't be a connection made.

Maybe this old butcher-block table reminds you of your grandmother, and you have fond memories of chopping vegetables next to her as a child. Maybe you were bent over that table the first time your grandmother smacked your bum with a wooden spoon. Maybe you were sitting around that table when your parents announced that they were getting a divorce. Each of these events creates a very different emotional connection to the table.

Any elements of place, or objects that you describe in your story, should be described in a way that connects them directly to the emotions that you were feeling at the time the story takes place.

The same goes for events. You can say, "I moved to a new city, and this is what happened there." But how did you feel about moving to the new city? Were you excited? Were you afraid? Was this a huge risk for you? The act of moving is insignificant when compared to your *feelings about the act of moving*—because after all, this story is driven by an emotional breakthrough an internal shift of some kind. The external events which happened around your internal shift are only relevant in terms of the emotions that you attached to them at the time. This is why it's so important to be honest about the emotions that you were experiencing at each stage of your journey.

In retrospect, the emotions we were feeling at a time when we were in conflict, or when we were building up to some sort of major shift in our lives, may seem silly. They may seem overblown. I think that we can all look back at our lives and say, "I was really upset at that point, and I would never act that way now, because it doesn't

make sense!" Just share honestly about what you were going through and what you were feeling. Add clarification if it's necessary, but don't gloss things over.

The raw honesty of shared emotion is a powerful tool of connection for your reader. Looking back on your own story from an analytical point of view, trying to dissect and explain why you were feeling certain ways, can dilute the power of the story. Don't apologize for how you felt at any point in your journey. It was what it was! In terms of the teaching aspect of your story, your honesty makes it okay for the reader to be honest with herself as well.

When it comes to making your story believable, honesty and emotion are first and foremost. When you establish that emotional connection with the reader, it doesn't matter how fantastic or unbelievable the events of your story might be, especially for those of you who are writing about paranormal experiences or divine communications. As long as the reader can connect to the feelings that you were experiencing during these events, the events themselves become much more accessible.

Another key to accessible writing is to treat the reader as an equal, not as a student. Even if this story includes information about your personal practices, branding, or business identity, it's important not to confuse this story with your marketing materials.

This project is a wonderful opportunity for readers to get to know you and to connect with you personally—which, of course, if you are working as an entrepreneur or small business owner, is really great. We don't want to discount the power of your story submission as a marketing tool for your business.

However, this is not marketing copy, nor is it an advertisement for your business. It's very important to make sure that you're telling your story from the perspective of one human being to another. This is not the place to try to sell products, nor is it the place to speak about the specifics of what you do in your business.

There will be a reference section at the back of the book where readers can find your website and contact information. Certain projects, like our print anthologies, also include your 75-word bio at the back of the book. If a reader is curious about you and what you do, they can learn about you there. But in the story itself, it's better to stay away from too much description of your business, unless your current business is a direct product of your moment of transition. If that's the case, then again, we want to talk about the events surrounding the creation of your business only in terms of your personal journey and emotional connection to these events.

We also want to stay away from any kind of instructional writing. We don't want to give readers tips and tricks for their own progress in the body of the story. In our print anthologies, the three journaling questions after each story give the reader an

opportunity for self-reflection and to dig a little deeper into the message of your story. But the story itself is not the place for that kind of instruction. If I see bullet points, action steps, or other types of instruction for the reader in the story itself, I'll send it back to you for a rewrite.

The moment the tone of your story changes from conversational to instructional, you will probably lose your reader. Women pick up a book like the one you're contributing to because they're looking for connection, not instruction. There are plenty of how-to books out there. Maybe you've even written one of them. But the teaching in the stories in this project is more subtle and self-directed.

The teaching stories that Inspired Living Publishing releases are meant to empower through relatability and demonstration, rather than instruction. Your story is your demonstration journey for how to move from a place of restriction into a place of openness and expansion. Whatever form your story takes, it's instructional in that it demonstrates that this type of transition can, and does, happen.

In this way, you are the heroine of your own story.

Let's talk a little bit about that. What does it mean to be the heroine in your own story, to be the champion and protagonist?

The most memorable story characters in both classic and modern literature are flawed. We relate to them because they are human and imperfect. In the course of their stories, they learn and grow. We watch them overcome whatever strife is presented, even though they are not perfect, even though they have stuff going on that makes it harder for them to surmount the obstacles that come up.

The same is true for you, as the heroine of your story. You're not Wonder Woman, and nobody expects you to be Wonder Woman. In fact, if you present yourself as Wonder Woman in your story without tapping into the emotional depth of your growth and transformation, the reader won't be able to relate to you. You'll become something other than what she is. You'll become less human.

We become teachers simply by telling our stories. We have been there, done that, and come out the other side. The most effective and relatable heroines in our modern world became great teachers and heroines because they overcame some sort of strife in their own lives. They weren't born knowing what they know.

So, when you're creating yourself as your story heroine, just remember that you didn't always know what you know now. Following your story arc as it mirrors the pattern of your own growth allows you to become a heroine to the women who are reading your story. You became what you are today. You gained your superpowers through a process of internal shift and awareness mirrored by external shift and transition.

Chances are, on your road to success, you stumbled quite a few times. You had to pick yourself up, dust off your knees, and keep going despite how challenging it was, and how much you wanted to just plop down and give up. Readers want to hear about those stumbles. They want to hear about the times when it wasn't so easy—because how many people have come to that point where it wasn't so easy and simply given up? You achieved what you have achieved not because you're perfect, or you were born with more than the average Jane, but because *you didn't give up*. By showing up as an example of perseverance, you become the heroine of your story.

Now, we've reached the final section of our class, which is writing tips for completing your first draft. Let me start by saying that everybody writes differently, so it's really important to honor your own process. If it feels good to you to sit down and bang out your entire first draft in one sitting, great. If it feels good to you to write a paragraph or two every day until the story feels complete, great. There is no right or wrong way.

Some people prefer to write with the guidance of an outline. If there are a lot of components to your story, or you're not totally sure what you want to include in your montage of illustrative events, it can be really helpful to draft an outline. You can also plot out your story on a graph, using that idea of the bell curve. Plot the events in your story as points on the curve, lining them up visually along the slopes on either side of the climax. You can also jot down some notes on how you'd like to represent the action in your story.

If you're a visual person, think in terms of camera angles and scenery. If your life were a movie, what would the camera have seen during those pivotal moments in your story?

The outlining process does not work for everybody. Some people feel that it interferes with their creative flow, rather than helping to stimulate it. If that's the case, scrap the outline. But if you feel like you're struggling to corral the information in your story, or are writing in circles, having an outline can help you make sure you touch on all the relevant points in the right places.

Once you do start writing, what you'll be working on is a first draft. Whether you write your first draft from an outline, or write completely stream-of-consciousness, or some kind of combination of the two, it is important to remember that your first draft is just that—a first draft.

Your first draft is an opportunity for you to get everything down on paper. It is the raw material from which you will refine, design, and finally complete your story submission. It's NOT going to be perfect. Nor should it be.

Don't worry so much about the length or word count of your first draft. Chances are there are going to be places in the story that can be compressed or reworded in order to fit the story into the word count guidelines for your submission. You'll be working on this "tightening up" during your self-editing process.

Again, the first draft is really just to get it all down on paper, to witness what pours out of you as you start this writing process. It might be different than you expected, so be prepared to embrace that as well. Sometimes the best stories are the ones that you don't expect to write.

When your first draft has been completed, it's a really great idea to set it aside for a little while. Some people might just need a day or two. Others might need a week or even a little longer (as long as you have that amount of time before your submission deadline). This break allows you to release any emotional attachment to that first draft, so that when you do go back and begin your self-editing process you can look at your story through more objective eyes.

Our next class, Class #3, will be dedicated entirely to the self-editing process. I'll address all of the things you can do to streamline and refine your story after you complete your first draft. I'll talk about the speaking voice versus the writing voice. I'll talk about tone and word choices, and give you some tips for making your story really cohesive and readable before you submit it for editing.

Have a blessed day, and happy writing!