

# WHAT'S YOUR STORY?™

The purpose of this tool is to equip you with the “right story at the right time for the right reason.” Building a library of great stories follows a four-step process: **CURATE** **CATEGORIZE**, **CONSTRUCT**, **CONVEY**



## CURATE

Stories are all around us. Step one of the curation process is to remember stories. The best way to do this is to ask yourself a series of questions:

- Who is your favorite client and why?
- What was your biggest blunder at work?
- What are you most proud of about the work you do?
- What did it feel like to really go above and beyond for a client?
- What's the best feedback you've ever received?
- What's one thing about your solution that you worry about the most?
- If you could change one thing about your firm what would it be?
- In your last win, why did that client say yes to you?
- In your last loss, why did the client not move forward with you?
- When you tell people about why you do what you do, what do you tell them?

What often happens when you ask yourself these types of questions is that stories pop into your mind. But they aren't stories yet...they are just the facts of what happened.

Step two of the curation process is to develop the discipline to jot down a few bullet points that capture the gist of the story you remembered (or just heard...or just read). Jot down facts like; who, what (happened), where, when, why. Also try to capture the emotions; fear, joy, anger, gratitude, sadness, inspiration.

- Who: \_\_\_\_\_
- What: \_\_\_\_\_
- Where: \_\_\_\_\_
- When: \_\_\_\_\_
- Why: \_\_\_\_\_
- Emotion(s): \_\_\_\_\_

### EXAMPLE

In 2018, I was on a long drive and listening to Guy Roz's podcast "How I Built This." Guy was talking with Sara Blakely about the early days of her company, Spanx. As I listened, it became clear to me that while I knew of Blakely and Spanx, I didn't know her story well at all. It also became immediately clear that this would be a powerful story for me to acquire. So when I got home, I listened to the interview again and jotted a bunch of notes that looked like this:

- Sara Blakely - Spanx
- Interview with Guy Roz
- Went to a party and wanted to wear pantyhose for the slimming effect, but not socks
- Couldn't do both; got frustrated
- At the time, she sold fax machines for a living in Florida
- Founded Spanx in 1998
- People (mostly men) didn't 'get' the idea of shapewear; she got frustrated/angry
- All the mills were in North Carolina, and all were owned by men
- There were no female patent attorneys for her to talk to
- She faced waves of rejection
- She never lost enthusiasm for the idea
- She wouldn't take no for an answer, surprised when a mill owner called her after a dinner with his three daughters
- She just gritted it out until the product took off
- When she had achieved "product-market fit," she would come home from her fax job and have to stay up all night shipping Spanx to customers
- She became the youngest female billionaire in US history
- Emotions: fear, frustration, anger, joy, excitement

Now, I had a disconnected set of "facts" to serve as the basis for a story. But I still had work to do to shape this into a great story.

## CATEGORIZE

The next step is to categorize your newly-acquired story. And yes, you do this step *before* you shape the list of facts you've curated into an actual story. The reason you categorize first is that it forces you to think through the "use case" (or use cases) of the story and thus will help you eventually construct the story you need for that use case. In order to categorize what you've got, use your Story Matrix™ to locate the story in the correct row and column. The stories you curate will always be one of four types of stories; success, failure, fun or legends. These are the columns of your Story Matrix™, and they serve as the first level of categorization.

The second level of categorization is to think through where you would tell that story. These are the use cases - or "reasons" or "situations" - where you would tell that particular story. These use cases form the rows of your Matrix. Create as many rows as you need, and avoid high-level rows like "sales." Rather... create narrow, tactical rows like "prospecting," "proposals," "objections," and "negotiations." These are all "sales" situations, and you will have stories tuned for each of these very different situations.

The third and final step of categorization is to give your story a short and sweet name...just two or three words...so you can remember that story over time.

### EXAMPLE

- Story name: "Slim Billion" (the name I gave this Spanx origin story)
- Story type: Legend
- Just a few of the use cases for this story:
  - Teaching qualities of great entrepreneurs
  - Helping sellers develop discipline/grit
  - Inspiring female founders
  - Finding "product/market fit"

Story Matrix™	SUCCESS	FAILURE	FUN	LEGEND
PROSPECTING		"ABC" Story		
PROPOSALS				"DEF" Story
OBJECTIONS	"GHI" Story			
NEGOTIATIONS			"JKL" Story	
OTHER USE CASES ↓				

Story Matrix™	SUCCESS	FAILURE	FUN	LEGEND
QUALITIES OF GREAT ENTREPRENEURS	"ABC" Story			"Slim Billion"
HELP SELLERS DEVELOP DISCIPLINE		"DEF" Story		"Slim Billion"
INSPIRE FEMALE FOUNDERS				"Slim Billion"
FIND PRODUCT MARKET FIT			"GHI" Story	"Slim Billion"
OTHER USE CASES ↓				

# WHAT'S YOUR STORY?™



## CONSTRUCT

The time you take to categorize your story helps you think through the story's use case: showcasing a **success**; demonstrating how to recover from **failure**; lightening the mood with some **fun**; connecting to timeless truth through **legend**. Understanding the use case now informs how the story should be constructed: what to put in; what to leave out; how many facts are enough to get the job done; what emotions you want your audience to feel.

Note that *constructing* a story is NOT the same as *fictionalizing* a story. It is simply emphasizing different elements of what happened to drive different outcomes and trigger various emotions.

The first step of construction is to take your set of facts and design them into a story. Every great story has five C's:

- Character: \_\_\_\_\_
- Context: \_\_\_\_\_
- Conflict: \_\_\_\_\_
- Climax: \_\_\_\_\_
- Closure: \_\_\_\_\_

The second step is to edit your story. Ask yourself: Does this detail need to be in this story for it to do the job I need it to do AND for my audience to feel the emotion I want them to feel? If not, edit it out of your story. The goal is for the story to be as short and tight as possible, but still do the job you need it to do.

The third and final step is to write out your new story in prose, based on the remaining facts in your five C's. Now you have translated a bunch of disembodied facts into a powerful story. As your use cases for the story change, you simply swap out some of the facts for others, emphasize a different emotion or two, and you have another version of that story that will do another job for you.

### EXAMPLE

Here's how my Slim Billion story took shape in step one of the construction process:

- Character**
- Sara Blakely of Spanx
  - ~~Guy Roz~~ podcast
- Context**
- In the 1990's, she sold fax machines for a living in Florida
  - Went to a party and wanted to wear pantyhose for the slimming effect, but not socks
  - Couldn't do both; got frustrated
  - She wanted the slimming effect of pantyhose but without the legs. So she just cut the feet off of her pantyhose
- Conflict**
- Founded Spanx in 1998
  - People (mostly men) didn't 'get' the idea of shapewear; she got frustrated/angry
  - ~~All the mills were in North Carolina, and all were owned by men~~
  - ~~There were no female patent attorneys for her to talk to~~
  - She faced waves of rejection
  - ~~She never lost enthusiasm for the idea~~
  - She wouldn't take no for an answer
  - ~~When she had achieved "product-market fit," she would come home from her fax job and have to stay up all night shipping Spanx to customers~~
- Climax**
- Surprised when a mill owner called her after a dinner with his three daughters
  - ~~She just gritted it out until the product took off~~
- Closure**
- She became the youngest female billionaire in US history
  - Her mindset and discipline are the things that set her apart

And here's step two:

- Slim Billion**
- Character**
- Back in 1998, Sara Blakely
- Context**
- Was getting ready to go to a party, and she had selected a pair of cream-colored pants. She wanted to wear a pair of her pantyhose underneath her pants to get the slimming effect that the hose would give her. But she also wanted bare feet for her look. So what did she do? She simply cut the feet off of the pantyhose, and a billion dollar idea was born. She went to the party and her little invention had exactly the effect she was looking for.
- Conflict**
- In the seven years that led up to her breakthrough idea, Sara Blakely had been selling fax machines in Florida. She didn't even get any leads...she just had four zip codes that she could sell to, and her boss gave her a phone book as her only sales tool. As Blakely herself says: "I would wake up in the morning and drive around cold-calling from eight until five. It wasn't long before I grew immune to the word 'no' and even found my situation amusing." But if she thought that selling faxes was challenging, it was nothing like the challenge she faced with Spanx. The men - always men - who ran the mills to make the product found it impossible to understand her simple, powerful idea.
- Climax**
- But she kept pushing. She would not take "no" for an answer. She just kept calling. She just kept showing up. Over dinner one night, a mill owner in North Carolina told his daughters about a call he had received from this woman named Sara Blakely. His daughters immediately saw the power of the idea, and insisted that their Dad talk to her. The next day, that man made a fateful call to Sara Blakely. That was the day that a brand, a company, and a billionaire were born.
- Closure**
- What enabled Sara Blakely to power through wave upon wave of rejection? Mindset, skill, and discipline. She had a mindset of resilience that helped her push through her fear of failure and become one of the most successful entrepreneurs in US history.

## CONVEY

Now that you have constructed your story, it's time to convey - or tell - the story! Storytelling is a performance art that requires a command of many different skills and disciplines. The most important discipline of storytelling is to distill the story down to its essence. The most important skill of storytelling is ensuring that your audience feels the emotion you have designed into the story. As you practice conveying your story, you will discover where to weave in the emotional elements. Here are just a few of the most powerful elements of storytelling:

- **Pauses** - Add pauses at key moments in your story to draw the audience in
- **Intonation** - Let your voice volume and pitch follow the action and emotion of the story
- **Emotion** - Emphasize what the character(s) are feeling as the story unfolds
- **Distill** - As you find the emotions and add the pauses, keep subtracting details that are not critical
- **Practice** - Tell your story out loud to a colleague or friend. Get feedback. Continue to edit and tighten the story, leaving only what you need

### EXAMPLE

Once I've practiced my story several times, here is what it looks like in final form:

- Slim Billion**
- Character**
- Back in 1998, Sara Blakely
- Context**
- Was getting ready to go to a party, and she had selected a pair of cream-colored pants. She wanted to wear a pair of her pantyhose underneath her pants to get the slimming effect that the hose would give her. But she also wanted bare feet for her look. So what did she do? She simply cut the feet off of the pantyhose, and a billion dollar idea was born. She went to the party and her little invention had exactly the effect she was looking for.
- Conflict**
- In the seven years that led up to her breakthrough idea, Sara Blakely had been selling fax machines in Florida, a hard, frustrating slog of a job (emotion). She didn't even get any leads...she just had four zip codes that she could sell to, and her boss gave her a phone book as her only sales tool. As Blakely herself says: "I would wake up in the morning and drive around cold-calling from eight until five. It wasn't long before I grew immune to the word 'no' and even found my situation amusing." But if she thought that selling faxes was challenging, it was nothing like the challenge she faced with Spanx. The men - always men - who ran the mills to make the product found it impossible to understand her simple, powerful idea.
- Climax**
- But she kept pushing. She would not take "no" for an answer. Selling fax machines had given her a thick skin and made the anger she felt getting rejected day after day just tolerable enough to keep going (emotion). She just kept calling. She just kept showing up. Over dinner one night, a mill owner in North Carolina told his daughters about a call he had received from this woman named Sara Blakely. His daughters immediately saw the power of the idea, and insisted that their Dad talk to her. The next day, that man made a fateful call to Sara Blakely. That was the day that a brand, a company, and a billionaire were born.
- Closure**
- What enabled Sara Blakely to power through wave upon wave of rejection? Mindset, skill, and discipline. She found joy in resilience (emotion)...and that helped her push through her fear of failure and become one of the most successful entrepreneurs in US history.