

Story-Ended Questions: Helping People Explore Their Experiences

An interactive workshop in conversational story elicitation
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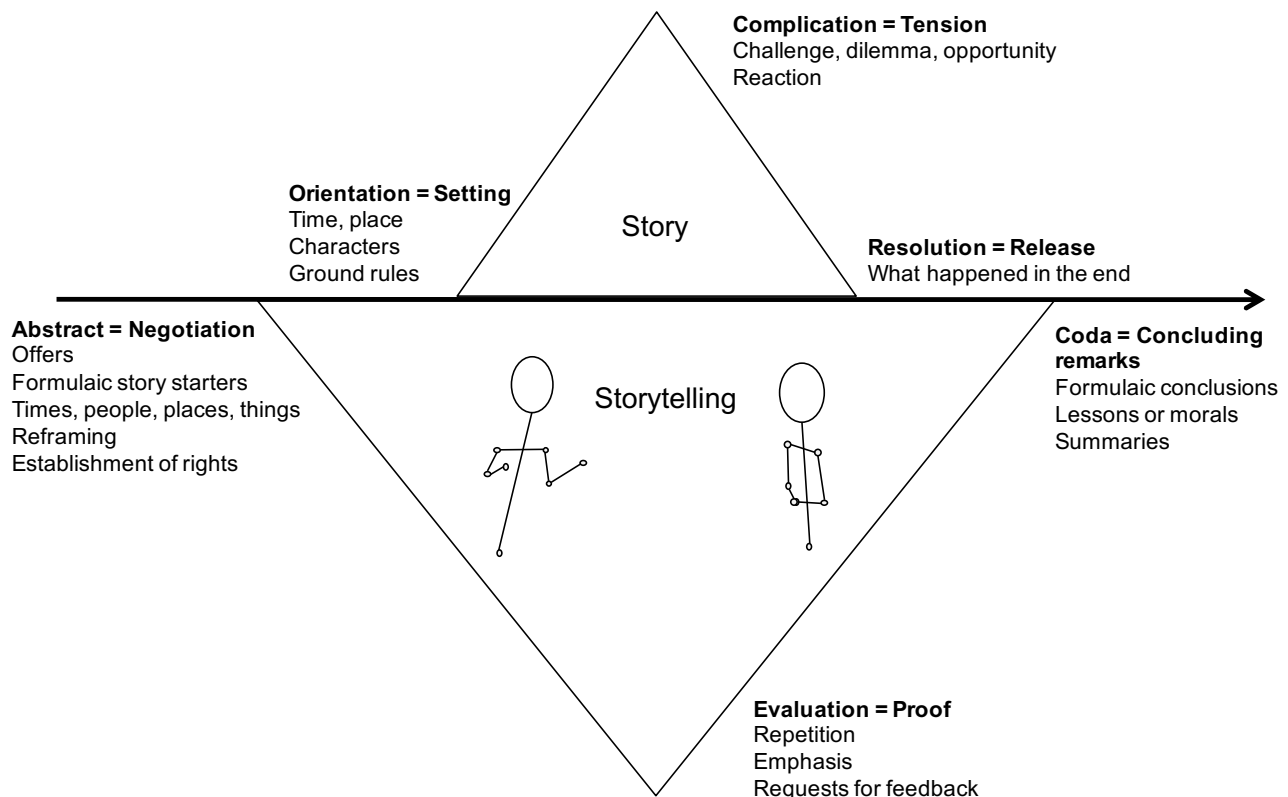
Agenda

20 mins	Instruction	The ancient ritual of conversational storytelling; asking story-ended questions
15	Activity	Form groups of 3; ask question, tell story, report back; rotate; repeat twice
5	Instruction	Observations on exercise; asking questions about stories: why and how
15	Activity	Same groups; ask question, tell story, ask questions, observe; rotate; repeat twice
5	Instruction	Observations on exercise; Q&A

The ancient ritual of conversational storytelling

<p>Everyday conversation has a tick-tock turn-taking rhythm.</p> <p>Nice people try to keep things fair and equal.</p>		<p>When someone tells a story, they hold the floor for a longer period of time than usual.</p> <p>This is a privilege and a danger – and privilege + danger = ritual. If you want people to tell stories, it helps to understand the ritual.</p>	
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Every conversational story has a shape like an **iceberg**. Most of what happens takes place under the surface.



How to ask someone to tell you a story

The best way to get someone to tell you a story is to **ask them a story-ended question**, which is:

- a question whose answer is a story
- a request for a story abstract
- permission to hold the floor

Closed-ended question	Open-ended question	Story-ended question
Do you like ___?	How do you feel about ___?	Were you ever surprised by ___? What happened?

To remember how to ask a story-ended question, think of how you ask people “How did you two **MEET**?”

MEET – a MEMORY of an EVENT you EXPERIENCED in TIME

the MEMORY	the active, meaningful choice of a memory you want to look back on	as you look back, in your experience, over the years, do you recall, do you remember, what stands out, what comes to mind, what rises up, when have you
of an EVENT	something that happened (verb), not a condition or situation (adjective)	what happened when, did it ever happen that, what took place when, a time, an incident, an event, an experience
you EXPERIENCED	to you , from your perspective, through your eyes	you thought, said, saw, felt, wanted, needed
in TIME	at a specific point in time, not as things “usually” happen	a moment, a day, an hour, a morning, a meeting, a visit

To help people think of a story to tell, think of how you say “**Cheese**” when you take a photo:

CHEESE – Change, High/low point, Event, Emotion, Surprise, Evaluation

Change	Transition, turning point, transformation, moment when things changed or shifted
High/low point	Best or worst, highest or lowest, most or least happy, proud, instructive, memorable
Event	A birthday, a doctor’s visit, an accomplishment, an argument, a happy accident, an epiphany
Emotion	When you felt happy, sad, relieved, angry, proud, disappointed, hopeful, hopeless
Surprise	Something you didn’t see coming, that made you stop and think, that woke you up
Evaluation	Something you’d like to see happen more often, or you wish hadn’t happened

What if the person doesn’t respond with a story? **Guide them toward a story** with another question:

If they give you an opinion	Could you tell me about a specific incident that would help me understand your thinking on this? Did you always feel this way? If not, what happened that changed your mind?
A situation	Was there ever a time when this was particularly true ? What led to the situation? What happened as a result?
An emotion	Can you remember a moment when this feeling had a particularly big impact on your life?
A scenario (what usually happens)	Can you recall a specific time when this happened, a time that stands out in your mind? How exactly did events play out <i>that</i> time?
An event but not a personal experience	How has this event affected your life ? What have you seen happen as a result of it? Can you recall a moment when this event had an impact on you, or on someone you know? What happened then?

First activity: ask, tell, observe

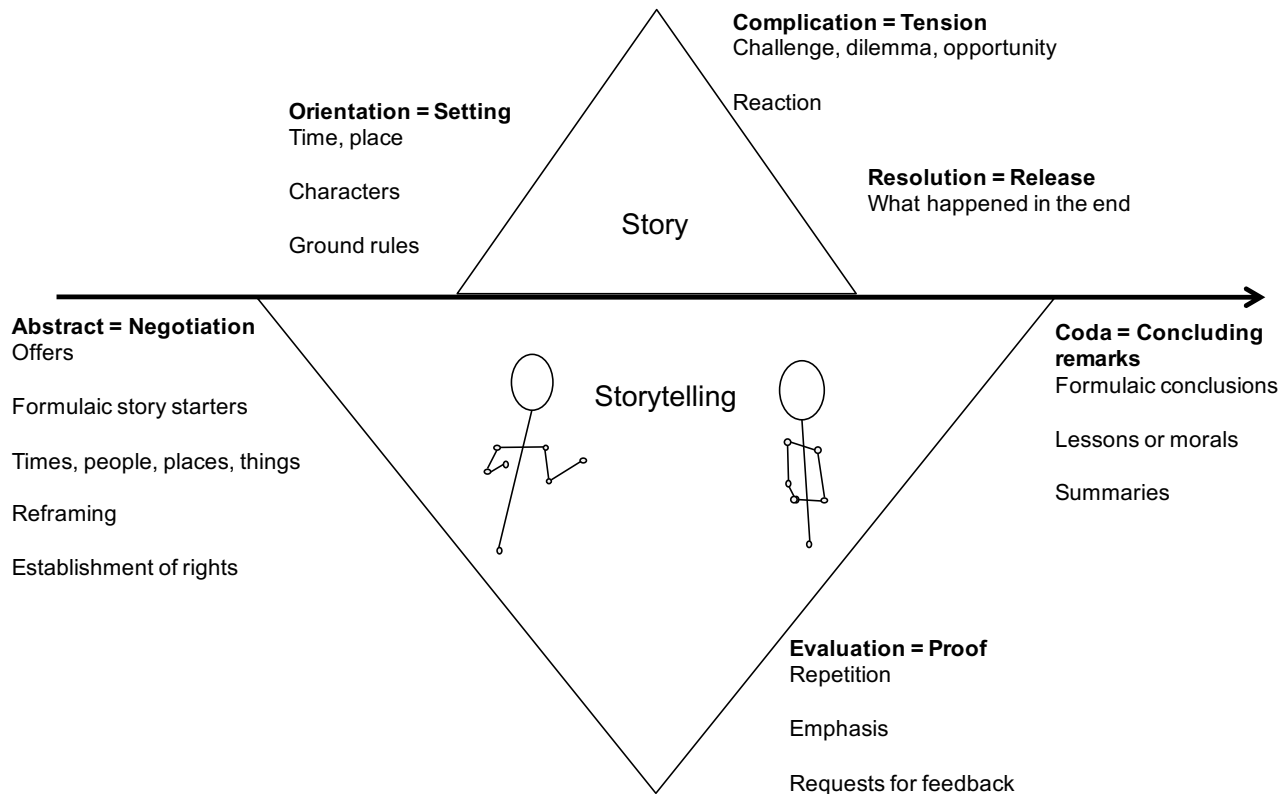
Form a group of three people.

Choose one person to take on each of these roles.

- **Interviewer:** Ask a story-ended question. Use the previous page for ideas.
- **Storyteller:** Answer the question.
- **Observer:** Listen. Take notes on the diagram below. Report back on what you heard.

Then **rotate the roles** and repeat, twice, so everybody gets to tell a story. If you run out of time, don't worry; there will be another chance to tell stories later. If you all tell stories and still have some time left over, ask another question and tell another story.

Use this diagram to record your observations.



Asking questions about stories

After someone has told a story in conversation, in their story coda and just afterwards, **they feel vulnerable** because they've been dominating the conversation for so long. If you want people to tell you stories, the worst thing you can do is not to ask the wrong question – it's to leave people hanging *after* they've told a story.

Asking questions about a story says to the storyteller:

- **I am listening** to you – because a story is a **communicative event**
- **Let's think** about this – because a story is a way to **make sense** of experience
- **We are together** in this – because a story is a way for people to **connect**

Some “I am listening to you” questions

The facts	Your perspective	Elements of the story
Who?	How did you feel?	What did someone else in the story think, want, need, know, or expect?
What?	What did you think, want, need, know, or expect?	Why did people do what they did?
Where?	What surprised you?	How they know what they knew?
When?	What did you like/dislike?	
How?		

Some “Let's think about this” questions

Interpretation	Imagination	Learning
Who or what helped you?	What do you wish had happened?	What lessons did you learn?
Who or what held you back?	What should have happened?	What dilemmas or decisions did you face?
Why do you think this happened?	What would have happened if things were different?	What discoveries or surprises did you encounter?
How did it affect you?	What would you do if you could go back in time?	What mistakes will you avoid repeating in the future?
How do you feel about it now?		

Some “We are together” questions

Your voice	Other perspectives	Accountability
What do you want me to do with this story? Learn from it? Pass it on? Make a change?	What do you think other people would say about this story, if they heard it?	Did this really happen?
Who needs to hear about this?	Who would approve or disapprove of what happened?	Who else was there?
Who shouldn't hear it?	What would other people have done differently? How would that have turned out?	Can you give me details on the people, places, and events of the story?
Who would want to hear it? Who wouldn't want to hear it?		Whose responsibility was it to take care of this?
		Who actually took care of it?

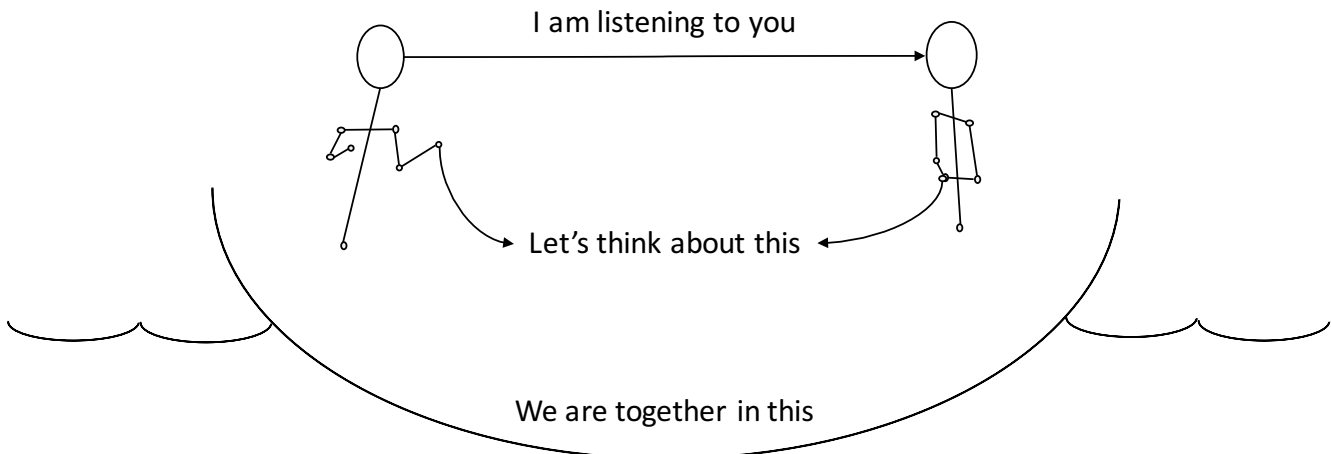
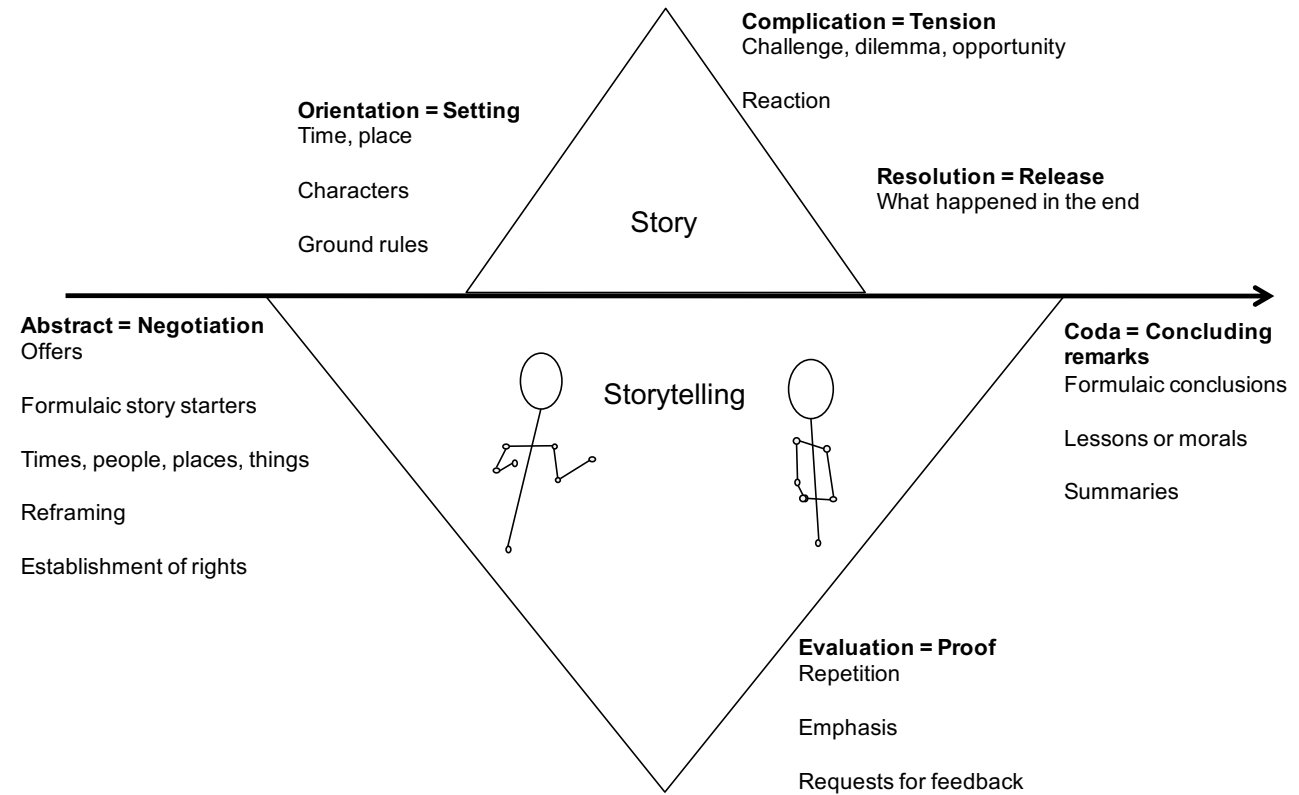
Second activity: ask, tell, ask about, observe

Form the same groups as before.

Choose one person to take on each of these roles.

- **Interviewer:** Ask a story-ended question. Afterwards, ask a question or two about it.
- **Storyteller:** Answer the questions.
- **Observer:** Listen. Take notes on the diagrams below. Report back on what you heard.

Then **rotate the roles** and repeat (twice if you have time).



Pass it on!

This is a self-replicating workshop. You can use this handout to go through the workshop again, this time with *you* doing the instruction parts. Just ask at least two other people to join you for an hour.

A few tips on facilitating the workshop:

- If you want to learn more about **the finer details** of the theory behind this workshop, you can read the sections in the book *Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization* that pertain to each part. You can find (and read) the book at **workingwithstories.org**.
 - For more on “The ancient ritual of conversational storytelling,” read pages 35-45.
 - For more on “How to ask someone to tell you a story,” read pages 122-129.
 - For more on “Asking questions about stories,” read pages 133-139 (and maybe up to 152).
- After you explain the iceberg model, it’s a good idea to **tell a brief story**, then ask people to use the model to describe it. Practice telling the story a few times beforehand so you are sure you can tell it in the time you will have.
- As you come out of each activity period, ask if anyone would like to **share an observation** about the activity. (But keep this to just a few minutes.)
- You might not have time to go into detail on all the elements of pages 2 and 4. If you run out of time, tell people that they can **skim the rest** of the pages while they are doing the next activity.
- You are likely to see a lot of variation in **how long it takes** each group to elicit, share, and discuss a story. Make sure people know that it’s okay to tell fewer or more than three stories in the 15 minutes. Whatever you do, *don’t set a time limit per story*. Keep the emphasis on the group activity.
- Make sure you **print copies of this handout** for all of the participants in your workshop, and *include this page* so people can pass it on again! You can find the document at **workingwithstories.org/morewws.html** (look for the “Story-ended Questions Workshop” document).

Use this space to take notes on things you want to remember when you do the workshop.